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MIKAGURA SCHOOL SUITE
Spiritless Coup D'État

Last Note. illustration:明菜

MF文庫 J

ミカグラ学園組曲

無気力クーデター

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二宮シグレ
Sigure Ninomiya
九頭竜京摩
Kyoma Kuzuryu
赤間遊兎
Yuto Akama
一宮エルナ
Eruna Ichinomiya
カナル
熊野さん
赤間遊兎
ハーきゅん
にゃみりん
演劇部部員

"How's this pose?! Should I tweak the angle a bit more?! Am I shining bright enough right now?!"

I keep striking poses and throwing out appeals toward Lumina Rikyuu, the newspaper club member interviewing me.

After all, a chance like this doesn't come around often!

I've definitely had those cringeworthy daydreams while watching TV or flipping through magazines, imagining, "If I ever got interviewed, this is how I'd do it!" I even went as far as designing my autograph in advance, knowing full well no one would ever ask for it. I've got two versions: a quick, scribbled one for when I'm in a rush, and a fancy one with a little doodle for when I've got time.

There was that one mildly traumatic moment when my mom found the paper I'd been practicing my signatures on in the trash and asked, with this pitiful look like I was some kind of hopeless case, "Eruna-chan, what in the world is this…?"

But still, still…!

“Hey, should I sign some autographs for reader giveaways?! I can crank out as many as you want!”

All that embarrassing practice wasn’t for nothing. It was all leading up to this very moment!

I whip out a marker and start air-signing with a swish swish swish! like I'm warming up for the real thing.

Yup, I haven't forgotten how to do it! It's etched into my very being!

"Uh, Ichinomiya-san…?"

Lumina, the newspaper club girl, gives me a dubious look but still snaps a few photos out of courtesy.

By the way, we've already gone through multiple outfit changes and location switches for this shoot. And yet, she hasn't complained once, snapping enough pictures to fill a light photo book.

"What, you didn't bring any autograph boards?! No worries, no worries! We're all human, mistakes happen. Don't sweat it!!"

I strike an utterly original pose that's impossible to categorize, flashing a smug grin while urging her with my eyes to hurry up and take the picture.

"N-no, that's not it!" Lumina protests. "Can we please get to the actual interview?! Honestly, we don't even need a single photo. We're using images from yesterday's battle for the article."

Her apologetic confession makes me freeze mid-pose.

"Huh? So all that changing into a swimsuit for a shoot…?"

"Was a waste of time."

"…And the elegant dance under the morning sunlight filtering through the trees…?"

"Oh, I didn't even take any pictures of that. I was just waiting for it to be over. Also, I might've dozed off a bit."

Lumina, despite her gentle appearance, has a surprisingly sharp tongue. Her words are brutally honest. And the way she says them with such sincere regret only amplifies their impact. If I were a delicate soul, I'd probably be crying by now!

I thought every club representative in this academy was quirky and unique, but to think even the newspaper club is like this! This quiet, timid-

looking glasses girl!

But then, a part of me just sighs, “Well, it’s Mikagura Academy, so what can you do…?” The fact that I’m already accepting this is honestly kind of terrifying.

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“Eruna-san! Wake up! You’re the talk of the school after yesterday’s battle! I’m Lumina Rikyuu, the newspaper club representative. Can I interview you?”

That’s how it all started—her shaking my sleeping bag to wake me up.

I could’ve sworn she was also kicking it with a smile, but surely that was my imagination. No way, right? I brushed it off as a mistake, but seeing her behavior now, I’m starting to think it might’ve been real.

Once I fully woke up, the words interview and article sent my excitement into overdrive. I got up at an ungodly hour—unheard of for me—and gave it my all, only to have it all shot down like this…

If I told her how hard I tried, she’d probably just say, “That was a pointless effort, huh?” So I keep my mouth shut.

Lumina eyes me suspiciously as my energy visibly drains.

“Alright, let’s get to the main event. Yesterday’s battle was a spectacular debut! You’re the talk of the school right now, Ichinomiya-san. You’re practically a hero on campus!”

Lumina’s flattery perks me right back up.

“A hero?! In Japanese, that’s eiyuu! What a glorious word… Keep going! Oh, maybe we should take a few more photos?!”

“No need for that.”

I bounce back with enthusiasm, but Lumina shuts me down with a cold, deadpan response. Not even a courtesy smile this time—just a blank stare.

“Y-yeah… Figures…”

I feel like I'm being toyed with, lifted up only to be dropped again. Wait a sec… Thinking about it that way doesn't feel so bad!

Trying to stay positive, I answer Lumina's questions for the school newspaper article.

It's a no-nonsense interview, as if she's silently begging me to stop fooling around.

Wait… Isn't this supposed to be a hero interview for yesterday's victory? Not some kind of apology press conference for a scandal, right?

Sensing the mood, I accidentally slip into polite speech, thinking, Gotta do this properly, gotta be serious.

"—So, you pulled off a huge upset by defeating the calligraphy club representative. What do you think was the key to your victory?"

"The key? Hmm, hmmm…?"

Honestly, I have no idea why I won.

It was like, in that moment, I wasn't even myself. Something just clicked, my ability activated on its own, and somehow, I won…? That's the truth.

But saying that in an article would be boring. I want to look cool! I want cute girls to fawn over me! I want to be hyped up and praised to the skies!

While my brain spews out these shameless thoughts, I decide to respond in what I think is the ideal, coolest way possible.

"Well, y'know? It was like, I was destined to win? I was super prepared, like, awakened? That's the vibe, right?"

I mix in a bit of the flair I've seen from famous artists and athletes. Heh, nailed it.

"Uh-huh, I see…"

Lumina gives me a look so icy it could freeze hell over. What is this game?! She's not playing along at all! She won't even take the bait and

roast me!

“You call yourself an interviewer with that attitude?! C’mon, make me feel good about talking!”

I grumble and pout, but Lumina just scribbles in her notebook, completely ignoring me. Wait, hold on, I’m seriously about to cry here!

“—Until now, the norm at Mikagura Academy was that abilities could only be activated through an item as a medium.”

“Huh?”

Suddenly, Lumina adjusts her glasses with a snap and lowers her voice, as if sizing me up with her question.

“Did you know? Activating an ability without an item is an extraordinary feat. In the entire history of Mikagura Academy, only one person has ever managed it.”

After that, I muddle through the rest of the interview safely enough. Lumina says she’ll write up the article right away and leaves in a hurry.

I call out one last time, “Are you sure you don’t need more photos?! I’m ready to throw in some fanservice shots if you want!” But she completely ignores me.

“Heh heh… What an impressive ignoring skill. I’ve found another formidable opponent…”

This is a whole different kind of battle from the interclub competitions, but she feels like a tough matchup—a real nemesis.

As I’m lost in thought, hmmm-ing to myself—

“Morning, Eruna! You’re up early for once, huh?”

Bimii floats in, bobbing up and down. At some point, it became his job to try every trick in the book to drag me out of my sleeping bag each morning.

“Morning, Bimii… So, what’s with the giant paper fan you’re holding?”

Bimii tries to hide it the moment he sees I'm awake, but the fan is comically oversized for his tiny animal body and sticks out like a sore thumb.

"N-no, this isn't what you think! I wasn't planning to use it to wake you up or anything!"

"Of course not! A paper fan isn't for waking people up—it's a fabulous tool for smacking someone who's acting silly!"

His guilty, shifty behavior says it all, despite his protests.

"Right! I brought it as a gift to celebrate your victory!"

That excuse sounds like he made it up on the spot. A paper fan as a gift? Talk about a forced cover story. And yet, Bimii's got this smug "Nailed that excuse!" look on his face that's honestly kind of infuriating.

Wait, am I being treated like an idiot here? I mean, I don't think I'm some genius, but Bimii clearly thinks I'm a bottomless pit of stupidity!

Even if he's a teacher despite looking like that, it's harsh to treat his adorable student this way. Sure, I might get some side-eyes if I call myself "adorable," and maybe no one would agree, but that's beside the point!

"Oh, thanks, Bimii! Since you went to the trouble, I'll make good use of it!"

I swing the fan with all my might. Whoosh! Whoosh! The heavy sound of air being sliced echoes through the hallway. This oversized fan is way more powerful than I expected.

"Eek…!" Bimii squeaks.

The paper fan was supposed to be a celebratory gift, right? A joke on his part, I'm sure. So I've gotta follow through and give him a proper whack for it!

As I close in on him, Bimii seems to accept his fate and sticks out his butt for the hit. Wait, no, that "I'm done for" face is making me feel like the bad guy here… Not that it bothers me!

The crack of the fan and Bimii's "Ryuuii!" scream echo through the dorm, signaling the start of a refreshing new day.

…Refreshing, right?

Chapter One: Less Than a Heroine

Humming a tune

I stride down the hallway, feeling like my posture's a bit straighter than usual.

"You're in a great mood, huh?" Bimii says, rubbing his red butt and eyeing me nervously, probably worried I'll smack him again.

"Of course I am! I could burst into song! Everything's different from yesterday!"

That's right—my big win in yesterday's battle. Joining the (temporary) Going-Home Club, which is supposedly a powerhouse. If my calculations are correct, the points I'll be raking in from now on should be on a whole different level.

No more scraping by on one meal a day! Heck, I might even have steak for breakfast!

No wonder I'm in high spirits.

When I explain this to Bimii, he mutters cryptically, "Is it really that simple…?"

I ignore him, belting out my off-key humming as I head toward my destination: the fancy on-campus restaurant.

It's a place I could never afford before, where I could only drool over the menu displays. But now? Now I'm allowed to step inside!

I swallow hard, take a deep breath, and remind myself that a single breakfast set here would've cost me a week's worth of food money in the past.

"It's fine! No more pretending to be a vegetarian and eating nothing but salad! No more drowning my hunger in free dressing like it's a drink! Those tragic days are over, Eruna!"

"That's such a sad monologue…" Bimii says.

I had this image in my head of a snooty mustache-twirling butler stopping me at the door, saying, “Young lady, I’m afraid your attire is… unacceptable.” But of course, that’s just my imagination.

In reality, I have to scan my terminal just to sit down, and the “seating fee” alone deducts points equivalent to a full meal from my old budget.

“Wait, just sitting down cost me a meal’s worth of points…? Is this a scam?!”

“Don’t say such things! This restaurant maintains a luxurious atmosphere worth every point!” Bimii scolds.

Is that how it works? I’m not convinced, but I’ll let it slide. After all, I’m the rising star of the (temporary) Going-Home Club!

With a hmph! I strut to my seat, determined not to be intimidated by the upscale vibe. But as I do, the restaurant starts buzzing. I can feel eyes on me—definitely not my imagination.

I strain my ears and catch snippets of conversation:

“…That’s her, right? The one who beat Himi-senpai in yesterday’s battle…”

“…I saw the footage too! It was amazing!”

“…The Going-Home Club is a special case, right? I thought only Mikagura-san could join. What do they even do?”

It’s all about me! I can’t help but grin. This is exactly what I’ve been craving! I want to slam the table in excitement, but I hold back. Gotta play it cool to earn the adoring gazes of the girls. Patience is key.

As I’m daydreaming and flipping through the menu—

“Morning, Ichinomiya-san! That was amazing, so amazing! I was totally moved!”

Meika Kanae-chan comes running up, her cheeks flushed with excitement. She grabs my hands and swings them up and down enthusiastically. Wait, is this how Kanae-chan usually acts? She must be really thrilled.

Before I can respond, she continues, “I was shocked that Himi-senpai, the calligraphy club rep, lost, but I’m even more thrilled that a classmate like you shone so brightly! Ehe, I can’t act this excited in front of Himi-senpai, though.”

She keeps gushing, clearly not done praising me.

Whoa, isn’t this girl just too adorable?! Is she wife material or what?

I’m hit with a wave of gratitude for enrolling in this academy. It wasn’t a mistake!

There were nights when I cried alone in my sleeping bag—no pillow to soak, just the bag itself, which didn’t absorb water well, so it felt like sleeping in a puddle.

Days when I watched everyone eat delicious lunches while I pretended to be “on a diet” and danced weirdly to distract myself.

“Eruna-san, you’re so disciplined, not even gaining weight! (Munch munch)”

“Yeah, we should take notes and slim down too! (Chomp chomp)”

I gritted my teeth through my classmates’ half-hearted chatter, sweating it out, swearing that one day I’d feast on a calorie-packed meal in broad daylight!

“And now! That dream! Comes true!”

I shout, striking a dramatic pose with sound effects like Shing! and beaming at Kanae-chan.

“…Uh, congrats?” she says, clearly confused but sweet enough to play along.

Also, the fact that Kanae-chan is having breakfast at this fancy restaurant…

She got into the calligraphy club, while I failed spectacularly. That one difference created a huge gap in our lifestyles. All because my handwriting was too avant-garde for Himi-chan to appreciate! Too ahead of its time!

“Even in a thousand years, I doubt your handwriting will ever be appreciated…” Bimii mutters.

“Shut it!” I snap back loudly. No, no, gotta stay cool. I’m getting all this attention, so I need to boost my likability! This is a turning point for my school life!

I shake my head to erase my blunder and try again.

“Ahem, you there, peculiar-looking critter? Watch your words, or you’ll regret it.”

“It got worse! What was the point of rephrasing?! It’s polite but even more hurtful!” Bimii cries.

Yeah, that was a bad call. Totally not my style.

As we bicker, Kanae-chan seems to pick up on my thoughts and waves her hands frantically, as if to clear up a misunderstanding.

“I don’t eat breakfast here every morning! I saw you coming in and just had to tell you how excited I was! I couldn’t wait until we met in class!”

She blushes and admits she doesn’t have that many points to spare.

Oh, I’m such a fool for feeling distant from my former sleeping-bag buddy! I need to repent! And yeah, the whole “sleeping-bag buddy” thing was weird from the start.

I remember running into Kanae-chan after school once and taking purikura photos together. I wrote some cringey message like, “Ex-sleeping-bag buddies! Our bond is still as hot as a sleeping bag!” and got a complicated look from her. I’d love to erase that memory.

“Your feelings mean a lot, Kanae-chan. You’re always welcome back in my sleeping bag!”

“…Um, I’d rather not,” she says.

“Aw, don’t be shy! You’re so cute!” I tease, playfully ruffling her hair.

“That’s not what she means…” Bimii mutters.

But I'm too hyped up to hear him. My mood is soaring!

Even as I'm riding this high, a part of me is calmly observing myself.

Kanae-chan's recommended Morning Special Set arrives at the table. As I savor it, I furrow my brow in thought.

I know I can't just keep basking in yesterday's victory.

That win was probably a one-time fluke, like beginner's luck. With the whole school talking about it and the battle footage seen by tons of students, I've gained a bit of confidence, but I'm certain the next one won't go the same way.

Bimii once mentioned that the battles are broadcast to all students to encourage them to keep pushing themselves. It makes sense—knowing your opponent's abilities versus not knowing them changes everything.

While I'm lost in these serious thoughts, Kanae-chan, oblivious to my introspection, says, "I'm such a cat tongue!" as she blows on her soup to cool it down.

Oh no, I almost hugged her! I'm overwhelmed with the urge to pull Kanae-chan into my arms! Would that be a crime? An instant arrest situation? No, it's definitely not a crime! It's self-defense! Okay, I'm probably using "self-defense" completely wrong, but it's fine.

As I juggle serious thoughts and heart-pounding excitement while marveling at the luxurious breakfast, the restaurant suddenly buzzes louder than when I walked in.

There, led by Yuto Akama, are the members of the drama club.

"Wow, the drama club's main crew is all here?! Even Yuto Akama, the club rep, and Nyamirin-senpai!"

"They've got this aura, don't they? You can't look away!"

I only met them briefly during a trial club session, but I didn't realize they were this popular…

The male drama club members are basking in the squeals of female

students, while the female members are drawing heated stares from the guys.

—Especially Nyamirin-senpai's chest!

I get why people can't help but stare! Even as a girl, I'm mesmerized!

Kanae-chan seems to feel the same, sighing as she compares her chest to Nyamirin's. No, no, Kanae-chan, you're perfect as you are! Stay just the way you are!

There's room for all kinds of girls, and I love them all!

"Yo, Ichinomiya-chan!"

Yuto Akama, the drama club rep, calls out to me casually, snapping me out of my reverie.

The other drama club members trailing behind him wave or nod in greeting.

"Hey, hey! Sorry for causing a ruckus during the trial session!"

"For real. You stormed in like a typhoon and left just as fast."

"No way, really…?"

"I'm not complimenting you! Why're you acting all shy?!"

I wiggle bashfully, and Yuto reacts with predictable gusto. The other club members watch us with warm smiles.

They seem like such a tight-knit group! I wonder if the Going-Home Club could be like this someday. Flirting with a goddess, maybe?! Right?!

As I'm lost in creepy fantasies, Yuto says, "I saw it in the newspaper club's special edition. Look!"

At his prompting, Nyamirin-senpai happily hands me the special edition.

Wait, the interview just happened, and it's already published?! What kind of speed is this?!

Kanae-chan also takes a copy from another drama club member, bowing repeatedly in thanks.

“The Mikagura Academy newspaper club is top-notch! Besides the digital newspaper sent to terminals, they print free special editions on paper for big news!” Bimii explains.

“Wow, so you pay points to read the regular school newspaper, huh?”

I never had enough points to spare for that, so I had no idea… Even if I did, I probably wouldn’t have read it. Newspapers aren’t food! They don’t fill your stomach! I’m still growing, so my appetite always trumps my thirst for knowledge!

But, as I was thinking earlier, knowing your opponent’s info versus not knowing it makes a huge difference in battles. In that sense, the newspaper club’s role at Mikagura is pretty significant.

I eagerly skim the article to see how Lumina wrote about me.

The first thing that catches my eye is the bold, flashy headline:

‘Hot New Student Eruna Ichinomiya Splurges on a Luxe Breakfast!’

“What the heck is this?!”

The giant photo next to the headline isn’t from yesterday’s battle or the tons of posed shots we took this morning. It’s me, right now, mid-bite, chomping down on a pancake from the Morning Special Set with my mouth wide open.

“Get it? We saw in the paper you were here, so we came to say hi,” Yuto says with a mischievous wink.

No, no! This isn’t a newspaper—it’s like a tabloid! I was expecting a heroic interview with a dazzling star, not this! When did they even take this picture?!

“The newspaper club rep, Lumina, is known for occasionally getting the urge to write articles like this,” Bimii explains.

So I got hit head-on by her impulse?! What kind of tragedy is this?! It’s

real because it's in the paper, but still!

"They usually put out proper newspapers," Bimii adds.

Then why did this one turn out so wild?!

I think back to this morning. Me, changing outfits and striking poses while ignoring Lumina's reactions.

"Hey, touch up the photos a bit! Make my eyes, like, twice as big!" I'd demanded, blatantly asking for digital edits.

"Should I sing a song too?!" I'd asked, completely losing the plot. (I ended up belting out three full songs.)

Ugh… The more I remember, the more it feels like I brought this on myself…

Seeing my despair, Yuto laughs gleefully, as if he came just to see my face.

"It's a great article showing the real, unfiltered Ichinomiya-chan!"

The drama club members seem to genuinely think so, and it doesn't feel malicious.

"Hmm, so this is the newspaper club, huh…"

I'm a little impressed. It's far from the image I wanted to project, and they didn't write it the way I hoped.

But this article probably conveys who I am to everyone who saw my battle footage.

"It's questionable whether it needed to be a special edition, though," Bimii says.

"Right?! That's the first smart thing you've said in your mediocre life!" I exclaim.

"That's harsh!" Bimii cries.

The mood lightens, and the drama club members join us at the table for

breakfast.

I pat Kanae-chan's head as she tenses up from the sudden crowd, watching the lively drama club. Yuto, the rep, doesn't act superior at all and is well-liked and teased by everyone. I stare at him too long, and he gestures like, "What?"

"I had fun watching your battle yesterday, Ichinomiya-chan! The way you transformed during the fight was wild! Is your usual vibe all an act? If so, you've got some serious talent," he says jokingly.

Did I really change that much?! As a kid, people used to say I'd switch gears in clutch moments. Was that what happened? I have no clue…

My mom always said I was a kid who could only look forward when I got absorbed in something. If someone who's known me forever says so, it's probably true, but I'd argue it's a bit different.

Even when I'm not absorbed, I'm always looking forward.

"It's not an act! I'm just not that clever!" I say.

"Yeah, I know," Yuto replies, sticking out his tongue and laughing.

Even though he's blatantly teasing me, I can't hate him. Maybe his leadership is why the drama club is one of Mikagura's biggest clubs?

But there's something off about his ever-changing expressions. He's here, but it's like his heart is somewhere else. Does he seem lonely sometimes, or is that just me?

"Want this? I'm taking it!" Nyamirin-senpai says.

"No, wait! That's my favorite, I was saving it for last! Give it back, Nyamirin!"

"Eh? I already took a bite. Should I give it back~?"

"No way! You already bit it! Stop getting your face so close! Why are you trying to feed it to me?!"

Nyamirin-senpai and Yuto's playful banter is so wholesome, but even then, I catch a glimpse of his dark, troubled eyes.

Nobody else seems to notice.

“Hmm…?”

“What’s wrong, Eruna?” Bimii asks, munching on my pancake without permission.

I give him a chop and shake my head, saying it’s nothing.

The more I watch Yuto, the more his smiles seem fake. Is he feeling sick? I start to worry.

Maybe he’s hiding it to avoid worrying his club members.

When I’m sick, I milk it for all it’s worth, playing up how bad I feel to get pampered! I even specify what snacks or fruits I want as get-well gifts. If I get something I don’t like, I’ll say, “Ugh, this isn’t helping my fever…” and demand a swap!

What’s with the difference between me and Yuto?!

It got so bad that my friends stopped visiting, and if I even mentioned feeling sick, they’d roll their eyes and say, “What, hungry again?”

No, no, forget my embarrassing past! Is Yuto okay?

“Hey, you seem like you’re forcing it… You don’t have to push yourself so hard, you know?” I whisper in his ear so no one else hears.

“Huh…?”

He looks shocked, his eyes wide, and says, “I’m fine,” before brushing it off.

Was I wrong…?

“Really okay?” I mutter to myself.

Yuto flashes a peace sign, acting cheerful to dodge the topic. I can’t press further in this atmosphere. Oh well.

We finish breakfast amid the lively chatter, and I cross my arms, thinking about what's next.

"More like, what's happening after school today…"

That's right—I don't have time to worry about others.

I've got another battle to dive into this afternoon.

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Right after my battle with Himi-chan ended, the cheers from students watching the live footage reached me and Himi-chan.

The barrier for the battle had just lifted, and the school building should've been empty, so the cheers were coming from far away. Still, they spoke to

the shock of my upset victory.

“Yay! I beat Himi-chan! I actually won?!”

“Muu! That’s not fair, not fair at all! I didn’t know Eruna-chan had that kind of ability!” Himi-chan protests, hopping around like a pouty kid.

Her battle aura is gone, and she’s back to her usual laid-back self.

But I was just as surprised about my ability!

I stare at my fingertips, which shot light bullets, but the heat I felt during the battle has vanished completely.

It doesn’t feel real, but it’s definitely not a dream.

“Fufufu! I hoped to at least make a mark, but I didn’t expect this outcome!” I say, hyped up.

Himi-chan, teary-eyed, starts playfully hitting me. “Muu! Boo! Cheater!”

I don’t think I cheated, but she’s so adorable that I let her do it.

I wonder if Seisa-senpai saw. Will she praise me? Marry me?!

My imagination runs wild, already planning our wedding and how many kids we’ll have.

“Eruna, Eruna!” Bimii calls.

Yes, we’re both in the Going-Home Club, under the same roof! Oh, Seisa-senpai, no way, that’s too much!

“Hey, can you hear me? Eruna!” Bimii tries again.

“Quiet down!” I snap.

“Ryu, ryui…” Bimii whimpers.

Bimii shows up with a party popper, clearly excited, but I need him to hold off so I can finish my daydreams.

Seeing Bimii sulk, I pick him up. “Kidding, kidding! Thanks, Bimii! Woo-hoo!”

I toss him in the air to share the joy.

“That cold tone was definitely not a joke…” Bimii grumbles, letting himself be toyed with.

As the popper goes off with a bang!, Himi-chan inexplicably joins in the celebration.

“Yay! Congrats!”

She’s so caught up in the party vibe, it’s hard to believe she’s a senior! Isn’t she too pure?!

“…Oh! I lost, didn’t I?! So frustrating!” she says, suddenly remembering and hitting me again.

I’m a hopeless dreamer who wants to live without working, playing games all day. But if I had a daughter like her, I’d probably work hard…

She deserves an “Angel” name tag! I give her my stamp of approval!

“Winning against Himi-chan is thrilling and surprising, but my body felt so light, like I wasn’t myself…” I say.

“Yeah, Eruna-chan was super fast!” Himi-chan agrees.

Exactly. I’ve always been athletic, but moving that fast isn’t normal.

“Ahem! Let me explain,” Bimii says, clearing his throat dramatically and perching on my head.

“When you awaken an ability at Mikagura Academy, your physical abilities get a huge boost. That’s true for all students, not just Eruna.”

“Right, me too!” Himi-chan adds. “Before I came here, I was terrible at sports. I was unbelievably slow at running!”

She doesn’t exactly look athletic, but I won’t say that—she’d probably hit me again.

“But the academy only has cultural clubs, so most students come from cultural backgrounds. Someone like Eruna, with top-tier athleticism to begin with, is super rare. Awakening an ability here pushed her physical skills to an insane level!” Bimii explains.

“Got it! That’s why I moved so smoothly!” I say, jumping in place to test it. Wow, I can jump so high! This is too fun!

“And there’s one more secret,” Bimii continues, clinging to my head as I bounce.

“Don’t give me that ominous look!” he scolds.

He floats off my head, disappointed. “Eruna probably didn’t know, but the Ichinomiya family has a history of producing people with extraordinary abilities. Your cousin Shigure Ninomiya is one of them. I had a hunch this would happen!”

I don’t recall Mom or any relatives mentioning this… Or maybe I was gaming and brushed it off with a “yeah, yeah.” That’s possible. If Bimii’s right, maybe I was destined for Mikagura.

If so, Shigure could’ve told me when I was applying!

“Not fair! Eruna-chan’s a total cheater! You were fated to join Mikagura, weren’t you?!” Himi-chan shouts.

The word “fate” gets my RPG-loving blood pumping. Maybe I was born to be a hero here!

I strike a dramatic transformation pose, even though I’m not transforming.

“Wow, that pose is cool! I’ll do it too!” Himi-chan tries to mimic me but gets it slightly wrong, which is so her.

Winner and loser of the battle, yet there’s no lingering tension. Clashing head-on brought us closer, somehow.

The battle system seemed intimidating, but this vibe makes me want to dive in more. I’m even grateful to Seisa-senpai for picking me despite my temporary status.

As the barrier lifts and students trickle back into the school, the intense atmosphere fades, and normalcy returns.

“I need to report to Seisa-senpai. Bimii, how do I do that?”

“Use your terminal… Oh, you’ve got an incoming call!” Bimii says.

Before he finishes, a cheerful melody plays from my terminal.

Is this like a phone ringtone? I pick it up and—

“The goddess’s face is on the screen?! How do I save this?! Wait, if I kiss the screen, will she know?!”

“Calm down…” Bimii sighs.

I’m freaking out, and the call cuts off amid my squealing.

“Noooo!” I wail.

“Stop strangling me, ryui!” Bimii chokes.

“Eruna-chan, you’re gonna kill the teacher!” Himi-chan cries.

Who cares about that?! I missed a precious call from Seisa-senpai!

“I saw a flowery afterlife for a second… Was I rolling my eyes?” Bimii gasps.

His face always looks like that, so I can’t tell.

“It’s okay! Look, there’s a message on your terminal!” Himi-chan points out.

Sure enough, there’s a message from Seisa-senpai. Permanent save material!

“Press here to play it,” Himi-chan says.

I tap the terminal, and—

“The goddess appears?!”

I thought it'd just be a voicemail, but I literally fall over and prostrate myself.

"It's a hologram with audio," Bimii explains. "Looks like she just woke up, still in pajamas."

That's the key point!

Seisa-senpai's not in her uniform but in adorable pajamas!

So cute! YES! K-A-W-A-I-I!

I flail my arms, trying to convey my wordless excitement to Himi-chan and Bimii.

"Eruna-chan's turning into some kind of unknown animal…" Himi-chan says.

"Too much stimulation," Bimii sighs. "Don't stare."

The life-sized hologram is so vivid, it's divine. Modern tech is wild!

"Bimii, turn around. I've got a mission to fulfill!" I say.

"You can't touch the hologram! And stop breathing so heavily!" Bimii scolds.

Tch, how'd he know? Fine, I'll enjoy it slowly later!

Giggling creepily, I wait for the goddess's words.

She must've just woken up. After a graceful yawn, she speaks in a sleepy, sultry voice.

"I figured the battle's over by now, so I'm calling. How'd it go?"

"She didn't watch?!" I yelp, falling on my butt.

Himi-chan mutters, "Her reactions are never boring," but of course I'm reacting big!

I thought she'd praise me, so the disappointment hits hard.

Unfazed by my gloom, the message continues.

"I want to hear what you saw and felt, not through a video but in person. I'm sending someone to pick you up. Can you come to my room?"

The hologram ends with Seisa-senpai's gentle words.

Wait… what? I was dropped to rock bottom and then shot back to the clouds!

"This is bad, Bimii, I'm gonna be busy!" I say, sweating nervously.

"Busy with what?" Bimii asks.

"Wedding preparations, obviously! Gotta think of kids' names and meet her parents!"

"Calm down! Girls can't marry, you can't have kids, and you'd be too embarrassing to introduce to Seisa's parents!" Bimii retorts.

"Oh, right! Wait, that last part's not true! You think I'm embarrassing?!"

"Of course!" he answers instantly.

His bluntness makes me accept it like, "Oh, okay…" and I miss my chance to get mad.

"Eruna-chan, the audio's still playing," Himi-chan says, shushing me.

The hologram's off, but the audio continues.

"I've heard a lot about you from Bimii… So, this message will self-destruct after playback. See you later."

A beep sounds, followed by a robotic voice: "Message deleted. Cannot be recovered."

"Wait a second?!" I scream.

"No waiting!" the terminal responds.

“It talks back?! That’s cool, but is that feature necessary?! Why’s it suddenly so chatty?!”

I yell at the terminal. Is it equipped with some over-the-top AI?! I’m exhausted from all these shocks…

“There’s no such feature. Seisa probably recorded the robotic voice too,” Himi-chan says, smiling.

What?! She even predicted my reaction?!

“Seisa’s quite playful despite appearances,” Bimii says.

“Really!? That’s adorable! But I don’t wanna picture her recording that!”

Smirking, satisfied with her work? Cute, but no—!

Still, reporting to her room in person? Joy bubbles up.

Who cares if I can’t save the video? I’ll etch her real image into my heart!

I forget my plan to write a thesis on “Can humans love a video forever?”

Waiting for her pickup, my heart swells with anticipation.

*

Outside the car window, Mikagura’s lush greenery flows by.

Inside, two girls and a beast play a game.

“This isn’t the King Game I know, ryui… How does it end, ryui?”

Bimii mutters, bewildered, but Himi-chan and I are deep in our New King Game.

“No rulebook! It’s all instinct!” I declare.

“Even with that cool pose, I’m lost, ryui…”

Ugh, so noisy! If Bimii doesn’t get it, he can watch and learn.

“Ugh, you’re too good, Eruna-chan! What’s your rank?” Himi-chan asks, frustrated after another loss.

Great question! I’ve been dying to brag!

“My rank? Department Head! Hehe, just got promoted!”

“King Game with corporate ranks!? Are we salarymen!? What’s the setting, ryui!?”

Who promotes you, ryui? Bimii grumbles, but I ignore him and restart the game.

It’s simple: prepare cards, one marked “King,” shuffle, and deal. It starts with a song, where messing up or hesitating deducts points—strict local rules.

I focus and sing:

“King♪ King♪ Silly King♪ Fo-fo-fo-fo♪ King Game! Four!♪”

Himi-chan joins, and we gauge each other’s skill. Nice, Himi-chan, you’ve improved!

“Stop, stop, ryui! So many issues, but acting like it’s normal? Wait, ryui!” Bimii cries.

“Sensei, don’t ruin our heated match!” Himi-chan says.

It’s wasted on him—he can’t tell it’s a hot match. I sigh dramatically. Bimii flinches but persists,

“What’s that song, ryui!? Maybe I misheard—sing it again!”

“Fine, Himi-chan, ready? Go!”

“King♪ King♪ Silly King♪ Fo-fo-fo-fo♪ King Game! Four!♪”

“You said ‘Four,’ ryui!? Is this the fourth game!? When did it become a series, ryui!?”

Poor Bimii, left behind by the times…

Pat, pat.

“Eruna!? Stop pity-patting my shoulder, ryui! It’s humiliating!”

Himi-chan, unable to bear the pity, wipes tears but brightly continues,

“Sensei, learn it! It’s okay, I won’t laugh!”

“Thanks, ryui… Wait…?”

Bimii, half-convinced he’s at fault, quiets down.

“Let’s continue! From the song!”

Himi-chan nods, and we sing loudly:

“King♪ King♪ Fishy King♪ Fo-fo-fo-fo♪ Personally, I’d pick tuna!!”

“Stop, stop, ryui! What!? The lyrics changed!? That’s not a song, just a yell, ryui!”

“Lots of versions exist! Fish King? Gotta be tuna, right? Anything wrong?” Himi-chan says logically.

“Everything’s wrong, ryui! Too many mysteries—it’s a labyrinth, ryui!”

“Got it! Mystery solved! Bimii’s scared of tuna, huh?”

Detective Eruna’s deduction explodes. The culprit? Born with a weird face, trying to mimic a cute animal and failing!

“I’m not scared of tuna! That’s not the point, ryui… Fine, I’m wrong, just continue, ryui…”

I don’t like his defeated tone, but fine. I mime adjusting non-existent glasses and dive back in.

It’s a party game—keep the fun vibe! Critical point.

“King♪ King♪ Silly King♪ Fo-fo-fo-fo♪ King Game! Five!♪”

“I’m done, ryui. No more retorts. I know I lose if I speak, ryui.”

No retort-worthy parts exist! Weird guy.

“Who’s the King!?”

I check my card. Darn, not King. So Himi-chan—

“I’m the King, ja?”

She slaps on a fake mustache, exuding gravitas.

“Is that roleplay mandatory!? I’m barely keeping up, ryui…”

It’s fun *because* we roleplay! Usually for more players, but with two, I kneel before the King. In a car, it’s awkward, but subjects must kneel. The King’s word is law.

Now the real game: a sweaty psychological battle.

My attack as the subject:

“Your Majesty, behold this rare candy, invisible to fools!”

Nailed it!

Himi-chan, pondering grandly, replies,

“Hmm, good. I’m no fool, so I see it clearly. How about a reward invisible to fools?”

“Grateful happiness! I’m no fool, so I see it. I’ll buy a foreign car and leave this land!”

Phew! What a match! A historic New King Game showdown!

We shake hands firmly, praising each other’s efforts.

“What was that!? Is it over, ryui!? Feels like a good match, but who won, ryui!? It’s not even a game anymore, ryui!” Bimii bursts out.

“Didn’t get it, sensei? So embarrassing!” Himi-chan says, mustache still on.

“It mentioned foreign cars!? Not fantasy!? What’s the world, ryui!?”

Tch, tch, tch. I wag my finger, explaining,

“The rules are invisible to fools.”

“…?”

“Everyone ad-libs, and whoever can’t keep up is the fool. They lose.”

“Is that fun, ryui…? So I lost…? I couldn’t follow from the start, ryui…”

“Yes, of course! Bimii loses! Boo-yah!”

Bimii, steaming, collapses. It’s okay—everyone loses at first. Eventually, some get hooked on the absurd rules’ charm. Well, a tiny few. Most walk away baffled.

As we play, Kurumi-sensei, either watching quietly or ignoring us, announces, “We’re almost there.”

Seisa-senpai’s mansion is the huge house from the entrance exam, and Kurumi-sensei doubles as its maid.

“I’m in a sleeping bag… No more rolling down stairs in it…”

“Your sleeping posture’s wild, Eruna-chan,” Himi-chan says, pulling back.

It’s not posture—it’s structural! Falling off a bed? Normal. I did that at home! But stairs? That’s the environment’s fault!

With my Going-Home Club membership and today’s win, I’m done with sleeping bags! Tonight, I’ll fall off a bed! Yeah!

…Ignore the falling part, please.

*

“Wow, it’s been a while!”

We arrive at Seisa-senpai’s mansion. Why’s Himi-chan here? I wonder, but she’s gawking excitedly—pure curiosity?

No, maybe she wanted to stay with me, even briefly!

“No way, ryui,” Bimii says.

“Stop reading my mind!”

My face probably gave it away, but Bimii's too sharp.

"Seisa-chan's mansion's legendary! She never invites anyone, so it's a rare chance!" Himi-chan says, eyes sparkling.

I'm fine with it, but reporting my victory with my opponent here feels awkward… Just kidding, that's an excuse. I'm Eruna Ichinomiya—I'll boast no matter who's around!

…Saying that myself is embarrassing. Be more considerate, me…

Kurumi-sensei strides ahead coolly, ignoring our chatter, signaling to follow. Like during the exam, I gape at the mansion.

Knowing it's Seisa-senpai's changes my perspective.

"Does the goddess bathe there daily…?"

"Stop ogling with weird fantasies, miss," Kurumi-sensei, in full maid mode, scolds.

Rude! Not weird—divine visions!

"Is Eruna-chan a pervert~?" Himi-chan asks innocently.

Don't look at me with those pure eyes!

"No! I'm just honest! Straightforward!"

No escape if that's called perverted, though.

Himi-chan and I detour, poking around, until Kurumi-sensei silently smacks us, guiding us to Seisa-senpai's top-floor room.

"Wow… This room's too big for one person…!" Himi-chan whispers.

It's vast and pristine.

"You could fit hundreds of Eruna's sleeping bags, ryui," Bimii says.

"That jab hurts, stop it!"

I'm growing fond of my sleeping bag. It's dear to me.

“A canopy bed!? And no matter how I rub my eyes, it’s the goddess, Seisa-senpai, lying there!”

Beyond the thin veil, a half-asleep girl.

“She was napping during the battle and went back to sleep after calling, ryui…”

“Maybe sleeping helps you grow? Hmm, I should sleep more!” Himi-chan says.

Please don’t grow more, Himi-chan… Hard to explain why.

Kurumi-sensei gently wakes the goddess.

“Young lady, your guests are here. Wake up. …Still sleepy? Then take your time.”

“Kurumi-sensei’s *way* too soft on her!?”

I want that pampering! We’re all students here—love us equally!

Imagining otherwise, I rare downer moment hits.

Kurumi-sensei might sing a lullaby if left alone. Tempting, but no time.

“Seisa-senpai, I won gloriously! I upheld the Going-Home Club’s pride! Praise me, praise me!!”

I rush the canopy bed. What pride? I wonder, but ignore it.

Seisa-senpai peeks through the veil. I try to dive in for a hug, but Kurumi-sensei restrains me. Tch.

“How’d you beat Himi-san? Tell me,” she says.

“Seisa-chan, don’t be so formal! Call me Himi-Himi～!”

No one in the calligraphy club calls her that.

She pats the bed, inviting us to sit. We line up—paradise! Without Bimii, nirvana? Kurumi-sensei lounges too—her maid vibe’s confusing.

Recalling the battle, with Himi-chan and Bimii’s input, I explain to Seisa-

senpai.

“I kept sending praise-me vibes, but no praise! I want a reward even fools can see!”

“Keep those thoughts inside, ryui…” Bimii sighs.

That’s why I came! I’m dissatisfied!

Then, a warm touch on my head freezes me.

“You did great.”

Seisa-senpai strokes my head, saying just that.

“Ha, hawa~! Hawawawawa!”

“Yay, Eruna-chan!” Himi-chan joins in.

This is my life’s peak! I can’t imagine greater happiness!

“But…”

Her hand stops. Is it over? Peak done? Downhill now!?

“You did great… but Himi-san’s carelessness was a big factor, right?”

“Ugh!?” Himi-chan flinches, cartoonishly rattled.

“If Himi-san went all-out from the start, breaking her crystal would’ve been tough. No?”

Himi-chan mumbles, “Well…”

“No way! I was born to be a Mikagura hero! I could even take you on, Seisa-senpai!”

I blurt out, knowing it’s too much.

I scramble for an excuse, but before I can,

“Quite confident, huh? How about this?”

Seisa-senpai smirks, proposing with a raised finger, her aura a bit scary.

“Let’s have a mock battle tomorrow after school. If you break even one of my crystals, I’ll grant you full Going-Home Club membership. But if you can’t…”

“What happens then, ryui?” Bimii asks for me.

“If you can’t, well… you’ll lose provisional status and go back to unaffiliated.”

“What!? Eruna-chan’s just a freshman! Breaking your crystals is impossible!” Himi-chan says.

“Too harsh, ryui!” Bimii adds.

Their lack of faith stings. I beat Himi-chan—maybe I can break one crystal!

I pictured easy praise and instant membership, so her proposal frustrates me.

Fired up, I declare,

“Fine, let’s do it! If I break one crystal, I’m living in this mansion as a full member!”

“You added to the deal, ryui…?”

That’s fair, right? I’m not moving until she agrees.

“Rethink it! If you fail, you’re unaffiliated again! Back to Sleeping Bag Man!” Himi-chan pleads.

Sleeping Bag Man? They call me that behind my back…? At least Sleeping Bag Lady…

No matter who stops me, my decision’s final. Wait, I’m accepting Sleeping Bag Man!?

“I won’t lose! Tomorrow after school, it’s on!!”

I stand on the bed, glaring down at Seisa-senpai.

“Oh no, ryui,” Bimii covers his face.

It's fine—I just need one good hit, not a win.

I can do this! I hype myself optimistically.

Seisa-senpai's cryptic, "I already see the outcome…" goes unnoticed.

*

Kurumi-sensei drives us back to the familiar dorm.

"Still a sleeping bag tonight!?"

I yell, standing before my trusty sleeping bag. Points haven't kicked in yet—reality's harsh.

"It's a hallway, but Eruna-chan's customized it too much… Making it homey?" Himi-chan says.

Exactly! You get it!

It's obvious at a glance.

I've plastered idol posters, built cardboard walls, and hand-drawn patterns to avoid looking homeless.

Living in a sleeping bag so long, comfort's my top priority. Not saving points to escape it, but accepting and improving it—kinda pathetic.

"It could be torn down anytime, ryui," Bimii says.

"No way! I oppose eviction!"

"It's not your land, ryui!"

I've lived here long enough—it's mine! I want a real room, but I'm attached.

Himi-chan taps my cardboard house, saying, "Ugh,"

"I'm heading to my room~ Good luck tomorrow!!"

She flees, pale. What's up? She could've stayed. Can't relax here? Don't underestimate cardboard's warmth!

“Eruna, look…”

Bimii points to where Himi-chan touched—my cardboard’s wrecked.

“Himi-chan—!?”

Her weight broke it beyond repair. Tape could fix it, but it’d look too sad, doubling the cardboard vibe.

I’ll win tomorrow and endure! I encourage myself.

I crawl into my sleeping bag. Bimii, at a loss, flies off without a goodnight.

“It’s fine. I’m just Sleeping Bag Man.”

I’m so used to it, even with a room, I’d sleep in the bag on a bed. Too surreal, so I’ll avoid that.

Tomorrow, I’ll join the Going-Home Club and live in Seisa’s mansion. I’m already in victory mode. Exhausted from today, I fall asleep fast.

Later, hallway passersby claim I mumbled,

“Munya… This is a luxury bed fools see as a sleeping bag. So fluffy…”

I hope it’s a vicious rumor.

That’s too sad, right…?

Chapter Two: Rising Star

The next day, I wake up still buzzing from yesterday’s victory. My sleeping bag feels cozier than usual, or maybe I’m just riding the high of imagining my glorious future in the Going-Home Club.

“Today’s the day, ryui! You ready for Seisa-senpai?” Bimii floats nearby, looking skeptical.

“Ready? I was *born* ready! One crystal, and I’m in! Mansion life, here I come!”

I leap out of my sleeping bag, striking a dramatic pose. The hallway’s my stage, and I’m the star. Ignore the cardboard walls sagging from Himi-

chan's accidental demolition.

"Don't get cocky, ryui. Seisa's no Himi-chan. Her ability's on another level," Bimii warns.

"Pfft, details! I'll dazzle her with my charm and athletic prowess!"

I skip to class, ignoring Bimii's grumbling. The school's abuzz with my name—yesterday's battle footage is still trending. Classmates whisper as I pass, and I soak it up like a sponge.

In class, Meika-chan waves me over, eyes sparkling. "Eruna-chan, everyone's talking about you! You're like a celebrity!"

"Celebrity? Nah, I'm a *hero*!" I wink, sliding into my seat.

The teacher, some owl-like creature named Fuwari-sensei, drones about Mikagura's history. I half-listen, doodling Seisa-senpai's face in my notebook. Hearts and sparkles included, obviously.

Lunchtime hits, and I head to the cafeteria, hoping to avoid the fancy restaurant's point-draining seating fee. Meika-chan tags along, chattering about the calligraphy club's latest project.

"You should've seen Himi-senpai's face when she talked about losing to you! She was all, 'Muu, so unfair!' but she couldn't stop smiling."

"That's Himi-chan for ya. Too cute to stay mad," I say, grabbing a tray. I pile it with food—points be damned, I'm celebrating!

As we eat, Yuto and the drama club crew saunter over. Nyamirin's stealing fries off his plate, and he's fake-whining about it.

"Ichinomiya-chan, heard you're taking on Seisa-senpai today. Bold move," Yuto says, smirking.

"Bold? It's destiny!" I puff out my chest.

Nyamirin giggles. "Careful, newbie. Seisa's crystals are tough as nails. Got a strategy?"

"Strategy? I wing it! Pure Eruna instinct!" I declare, brandishing a spoon like a sword.

Yuto's eyes flicker with that weird, distant look again. I almost ask, but Meika-chan distracts me with a question about my ability.

"Um, what *is* your ability, Eruna-chan? Everyone's guessing after that light bullet thing."

I freeze. Uh, good question. "It's… a surprise! Even to me! Keeps things exciting, right?"

Bimii facepalms. "You don't even know, ryui…"

The bell rings, signaling the end of lunch. My stomach's full, but my nerves are starting to kick in. Seisa-senpai's no joke. What if Bimii's right?

*

After school, I head to the battle arena. The barrier's already up, shimmering like a soap bubble. Seisa-senpai's waiting, looking effortlessly cool in her uniform, hair fluttering like she's in a shampoo ad.

"Ready, Ichinomiya-san?" she asks, voice calm but sharp.

"Born ready, goddess!" I shout, trying to psych myself up.

Bimii and Himi-chan are in the stands, along with a crowd of students. The air's electric—everyone wants to see if the newbie can pull off another upset.

The battle starts, and Seisa-senpai moves like a phantom. Her ability, *Absolute Territory*, creates invisible barriers that block my light bullets like they're nothing. I'm fast, but she's untouchable.

"Come on, Eruna, focus!" I mutter, dodging a counterattack. My body's light, just like yesterday, but her crystals—floating orbs around her—don't even wobble.

I try everything: feints, zigzags, even yelling "Surprise!" mid-attack. Nothing works. She's reading me like a book.

"Had enough?" Seisa-senpai asks, not even breaking a sweat.

"No way! One hit, that's all I need!" I charge, firing a barrage of light bullets.

She deflects them with a flick of her wrist. “You’re persistent. I like that.”

My heart skips—praise from the goddess!—but then she summons a barrier that knocks me flat. The crowd gasps.

“Time’s up,” she says as the barrier fades. Not a single crystal scratched.

I’m on my knees, panting. “No… Sleeping Bag Man… returns…”

Himi-chan rushes over. “You tried, Eruna-chan! That was still amazing!”

Bimii sighs. “Told you, ryui. Seisa’s out of your league.”

Seisa-senpai approaches, offering a hand. “You’ve got potential, but you’re not there yet. Stay provisional for now. Keep training.”

I take her hand, heart sinking but not broken. “I’ll be back, goddess. Next time, I’m smashing those crystals!”

She smiles faintly. “I look forward to it.”

*

Back in my sleeping bag, I stare at the ceiling. No mansion life yet. But Seisa-senpai’s words echo: *potential*. I’ve got that, right?

Tomorrow, I’ll train harder. Maybe figure out what my ability actually is. For now, I snuggle into my sleeping bag, dreaming of victory and goddess hugs.

“Munya… I’ll be a hero… zzz…”

Chapter Two: Apathetic Coup d'État

What story was it that taught me no child is born unblessed?

Was it a drama? Or perhaps a novel?

My hazy memory might have something to do with the fact that I could never bring myself to believe it.

Yuto Akama, drama club representative. Loved by everyone, with more friends than I can count.

When did I start "acting" as this version of myself?

When I think back, the frame of my memories always includes my little brother.

"Yuto-nii, Yuto-nii! I'll play the shady uncle, so you be Miracle Man!"

"Sorry, I'm totally lost. What kind of pretend game is this? How does a shady uncle even interact with Miracle Man?!"

He was innocent, friendly, and looked up to me, his big brother, in the most ordinary way. I just wished he'd stop coming up with such weird

roles for our pretend games.

Maybe that's where my knack for adapting to acting came from—I don't want to think about it.

"Hmm, to put it simply, the shady uncle accidentally discovers Miracle Man's secret identity and tries to publish a tell-all book to make a fortune!"

"That guy's the worst!"

I loved ruffling my little brother's hair as he laughed gleefully.

But I could never smile as brightly as he did. No matter how fun things were, I struggled to show my emotions.

The opposite of my brother. If he was the front, I was always the back.

When we went to the park, he'd instantly befriend strangers and come back with a ton of new friends.

I'd go to the same park, but no one would talk to me. I'd just watch from the sidelines, unable to join in.

That's probably why. Our parents doted on my brother, while I was ignored, pushed aside… always left out.

"Why don't they love me the same? We're both their kids. Why just me?"

I couldn't even bring myself to ask.

The shell I hid in grew thicker and thicker, and it broke my heart to see a happy family in stories, one that existed without me.

But what I saw was probably a warped kind of happiness.

…A makeshift family like that fell apart in an instant.

"Why isn't Yuto-nii coming with us? Why? Hey, why?"

"He's staying with Dad. Come on, let's go."

I stood there, stunned, listening to my brother and Mom talk as I watched

them leave. That scene still haunts my dreams, trying to break me.

Mom never once looked at me or said a word as she left.

"It's because I can't smile properly. I'm defective, incomplete, unneeded. That's why they left me… abandoned me."

No child is born unblessed? That was nothing but a fantasy.

That's when I decided, gritting my teeth, that I'd never feel this way again.

I'd live as the "Yuto Akama" everyone loves, just like my brother.

Not out of positivity or overflowing energy.

This is… an apathetic, lonely coup d'état.

To deceive others, you first have to deceive yourself.

"If I can fool myself… I can do this, right?"

*

The chime rings, and class finally ends.

Honestly, my head's been so full of after-school plans that I couldn't focus at all.

Bimii would probably say I'm never focused, ryui, but usually, I'm laser-focused on staring at Ms. Kurumi's beautiful face or sending passionate glances at the girls' absolute territories!

I've got a reputation for concentration, you know. Someone once said, "Ichinomiya-san's only good at focusing on useless things," but that's a compliment, right? Not sarcasm, right? Right?

I think taking everything positively is one of my strengths. Life's too short not to have fun!

So, here I am at the open field designated for battles.

There aren't many hiding spots, but it's wide open, perfect for using my

speed.

There's still time before the match starts, so the barrier hasn't gone up yet. I spot a few people in the stands—some here to cheer, others drawn by rumors.

"Hmm, nice weather! Perfect for an Eruna-chan day! How about we make today Eruna Day, an official holiday for the two of us, and go on a date every year on this day?"

Shigure stretches and spouts his usual nonsense. He says he's here to cheer me on, but I'd appreciate it if he'd stop saying things that sap my motivation.

"A regular holiday would be super happy, but if it came to that, I'm confident I'd catch a fever and be bedridden every single year on that day."

Still, having Shigure here does help me relax a bit. If it's calculated, he's a pretty crafty cousin.

"If you're bedridden, I'll nurse you all day! A fever-weakened Eruna-chan is so honest and cute!"

Nope, definitely not calculated—just pure Shigure nonsense. What a shame…

"Get outta here!" I lightly kick Shigure away, trying to shoo him off.

"Ichinomiya-chan's always so lively."

Yuto Akama calls out, sitting on a fence a bit away. He's usually surrounded by drama club members, but he's alone for once.

"Hey, Yuto-kun! You came all the way to cheer for me?"

I wave enthusiastically, but he pulls out his terminal and points at it.

"I came because of this. Nice photoshoot, Ichinomiya-chan."

He grins mischievously, urging me to look.

A photo? What's he talking about? Shigure, curious, pulls up his terminal too.

I peek over, and there, blinking as a new update, is the school newspaper icon.

"What the heck is this?!"

"Mock Battle Spotlight! Hot New Student Eruna Ichinomiya vs. Going-Home Club Rep Seisa Mikagura"

The headline's fine. Being featured so prominently doesn't feel bad at all.

But, but…

"This photo has nothing to do with the mock battle! It's from that old shoot!"

Yes, the photo is the problem. This article should've used a cool shot from yesterday's battle.

Shigure, seeing the photo, blushes and beams.

"Why's she in a swimsuit striking a gravure pose?! Nice! I love it!!"

He gives a big thumbs-up.

"No, it's not like that! Well, it is, but it's not! This was supposed to be scrapped!"

I can't believe they used it now… I shudder at the thought of other outfit photos popping up in weird places later.

I stop Shigure from saving the image and turn to protest to Yuto.

"You came to tease me about this?! I was happy thinking you were here to cheer! Hmph!"

Yuto waves his hands dismissively and, with surprising agility, stands on the fence, mimicking my pose from the photo.

"Mrrgh, unforgivable! I'm gonna punch you, so don't move!"

"Okay, okay, but your pose was way more charming, Eruna-chan."

Shigure tries to back me up, but is that really support? Being compared at all is humiliating.

I'm a girl, you know? Though, Yuto would probably look good in drag…

I'm joking about punching him, but I'm about to go over and complain when I hear someone running toward us.

Turning to check, I see—

"Phew, I made it in time!"

"Asuhi-kun!"

Asuhi Imizu from the astronomy club, catching his breath, relieved to know the mock battle hasn't started.

"Some weird creature tagged along, but that's unimportant."

"Is that about me, ryui?! You let your inner thoughts slip out loud! That's a simple but fatal mistake, ryui!"

"Sorry, sorry, I meant it as a joke!"

"Even worse, ryui… Please, I wish it was a mistake."

Bimii slumps, dejected.

Asuhi, ever polite, bows to Shigure and even trots over to greet Yuto, who's still at a distance.

"Good morning! I'm Asuhi Imizu from the astronomy club… Huh?"

"…!"

The moment Asuhi tries to speak, Yuto turns away and leaves.

Huh? What's up with that? I glance at Shigure, but he just looks confused, like he doesn't know either.

Bimii seems equally puzzled, floating curiously.

"…Did I do something to offend him…?"

Asuhi returns, crestfallen, with no clue what happened.

Hah, this is it! I've got to fix this vibe! Driven by a weird sense of duty, I blurt out,

"No, it's not that! Yuto was just… holding it in! It was an emergency, you know, *that* thing!"

I make it up on the spot to cover.

"That thing…? Oh! I get it!"

Asuhi ponders, then blushes for some reason. What did he imagine? I'm curious.

"If it's *that*, it can't be helped, especially with ladies around…"

"…? Y-yeah, right?"

I nod along, but seriously, what did you imagine, Asuhi-kun?! The mystery deepens.

Shigure and Asuhi give me some encouraging words before leaving the field to let me focus.

It's just me and Bimii now. I check my terminal—start time's almost here.

Phew, I take a deep breath. I haven't planned any strategies.

This mock battle decides if I can officially join the Going-Home Club.

And my opponent is the goddess herself.

I know that no matter how much I plan, I never act according to it. I just get tangled up and confused.

"No choice but to go for it, right?!"

Honestly, my excitement to relive that feeling from the battle with Himi-

chan far outweighs any anxiety.

"Thanks to the newspaper club, this isn't just any mock battle—it's got crazy attention, ryui. Some clubs even pause activities to watch the footage together. Seisa's battles are rare, after all."

Being watched fuels me… that sounds a bit weird, but I'm definitely the type to get hyped by attention.

I think Bimii's deliberately egging me on, knowing this. It's his way of boosting me, and that makes me happy.

With the battle being broadcast, I've got to show the academy's girls my coolest side, right? That's the spirit!

"Hmph! Hah! Taa!"

"…What's up, Eruna, ryui? Suddenly getting all acrobatic with those poses."

"Obviously! I'm practicing victory poses for when I win! Like in fighting games, I want to do something like that!"

I try out poses with exaggerated shouts, tweaking them this way and that.

Bimii seems done talking, just watching quietly.

"Poses alone might not cut it. Oh, I want a killer catchphrase too! The kind that's so embarrassing you can only say it in a moment like this!"

"You know it's embarrassing but still want to say it, ryui… What a complex world."

It's fine if he doesn't get it. As a game lover, I've always dreamed of this, so it's inevitable.

I've got to practice, so I take a deep breath and shout, nailing the expression perfectly.

"I hereby pronounce your sentence! For the great crime of defeat, you're condemned to fall head over heels for Eruna-chan! No objections allowed!"

Sparkle!

Nailed it… I close my eyes, savoring the moment. I even changed my tone for the catchphrase—Bimii's got to be moved. He's probably willingly, joyfully accepting his sentence, right?

I sneak a peek at Bimii and—

"…Ugh."

"Why do you look like you're gonna puke?!"

So rude. This isn't the reaction I wanted. Was it that one part? Bimii's so picky.

"My voice cracked a bit, so can I try again?"

"Sorry, sorry!" I say lightly, striking an apologetic pose.

"That's not the issue, ryui! I didn't even notice your voice crack!"

Then what's your problem?! I'm about to press when I notice Bimii staring at something.

Almost simultaneously, my terminal's alarm blares, signaling the match's start time. In that instant, the air shifts. It's like the sky… the world's color changed. Just an illusion?

"The barrier's up between the field and the outside, ryui. From now on, it's just you, Seisa, and me as the referee, ryui."

Seisa-senpai must've arrived at the last second.

"Man, that's cool! I wanted to do that—make a grand, late entrance like the main character!"

Instead of a cool late arrival, I got here early to practice poses and catchphrases. Ugh, I want a do-over! Where's the reset button?!

Despite my inner turmoil, Seisa-senpai approaches, rubbing sleepy eyes, clearly just woken up, yawning softly.

It’s far from a grand entrance, but it’s still picturesque, which makes me jealous.

"Beauty’s such an advantage. If waking up early is worth three cents, beauty’s worth a million bucks."

"A millionaire from birth?! And in a different currency, ryui?!"

I lick my lips, awaiting the goddess’s first words. In the silence, only her footsteps echo.

A gentle breeze sways her hair, even through the barrier.

The wind gets through, huh? I think vaguely, starting to shift into battle mode.

…Enough fooling around.

"Morning. You ready?"

"Yep, I’m always ready to officially join the Going-Home Club, Seisa-senpai!"

I grin, hearing the terminal announce twenty seconds left.

We step closer, and I can hear the same message from the terminal at her waist.

"That’s not what I meant."

"Huh?"

Seisa-senpai, still sounding sleepy, clearly denies it.

"Are you ready to lose?"

She smirks, her gaze piercing like a gunshot.

I shiver at an expression I’ve never seen from her.

If I let my guard down thinking it’s just a mock battle, all my crystals will be shattered in an instant.

I swallow hard, steeling myself. As the terminal announces five seconds left, I declare loudly,

"Sorry, I don't do losing preparations! I'm gonna blow everyone watching away!"

I leap back dramatically as the battle start signal sounds.

"Let's see what she does first…!"

I'm confident in my explosive speed. If I keep moving, I won't be caught easily. I dash around the field, certain of that.

I have no info on how Seisa-senpai fights or what her ability is. I need time to figure it out.

As I felt yesterday, my athletic ability's way higher since coming to this academy. Cutting through the air like this is a whole new level.

"So, how's the goddess moving…?! What the?!"

I can't help but do a double-take, still running.

"She hasn't moved a single step from the start, ryui."

Bimii's voice barely reaches me, but there's no surprise in it.

Did he predict this? And looking closer—

"She's not just standing still—she's half asleep?! No, definitely asleep! That head-bobbing is totally a sleeping person!"

If she's asleep, no wonder she's not moving. She's my idol, but this feels like she's mocking me, and it's starting to tick me off.

"If that's how you're gonna play…!"

She must be underestimating me. I don't even need to use the ability that won against Himi-chan. I'll break her crystals with pure physical skill!

I kick the ground hard, my scarf fluttering as I somersault forward.

It takes just a breath to get in range of her crystals. No one could react in time, I think, powering up my fist.

"First attack, mine!"

I swing a speed-charged punch, aiming to shatter one of her crystals… or so I thought.

"…Huh?"

There's no impact. My fist just slices through empty air.

Seisa-senpai stands there, still looking half-asleep, maybe awake, it's hard to tell.

It doesn't feel like she consciously dodged. But my attack didn't even graze her crystals.

"Fine, how about this?!"

I circle her, still unmoving, throwing punches and kicks at her crystals.

I've done some kendo club support in middle school. My attacks should look pretty decent.

But—

"Not a single hit?!"

She doesn't move her feet, just tilts her upper body, shifting her crystals to dodge everything.

My precise, rapid attacks, my big kicks—all effortlessly avoided, like she's toying with a child.

Why? The confusion breeds panic, and that panic creates openings.

Before I can even notice my movements getting sloppy, I try to step back to regroup.

Crack!

A sharp shattering sound rings out as Seisa-senpai, looking bored, casually crushes one of my crystals.

"I wonder if I surprised everyone watching."

She whispers, letting the sparkling crystal fragments spill from her hand to the ground.

"You're just too weak, aren't you?"

Her words drip with a mocking chuckle.

"That obvious taunt won't get Eruna, ryui."

"Mrrgh! Even if you're a goddess, I won't forgive you!"

"Oh… she totally fell for it, ryui."

Bimii's saying something, but I'm so mad I can't process it.

Fine, I'll use *that*. Deep down, I knew from the start I'd have to, no matter what.

Seisa-senpai didn't see the footage of my battle with Himi-chan. I explained my ability verbally, but she can't possibly predict its irregular trajectory on first sight.

I lick my dry lips again, focusing energy into my fingertip like yesterday.

This time, I need a sure hit. To boost my odds, I'll use the environment too.

I crouch and leap high into the air.

The sun, still blazing despite the late hour, shines above her.

"…I see."

Seisa-senpai, slightly impressed, shields her eyes from the sun to look up.

"It's a shallow trick, but it's all I've got right now!"

I aim my finger like a gun at her, still unmoving.

"Max hype! Here we goooo!!"

My terminal flashes, showing ‘Ability: Toy Gun’… and then—!

"Huh?"

It vanishes. The light bullet from my fingertip hops toward her crystals, like it’s alive… but doesn’t reach them.

Unlike yesterday’s bullet, it’s painfully slow and fades silently before hitting.

"No way?! Why didn’t it work like yesterday?! One more! Ei, ei, ei!"

I try to summon energy to my fingertip again, but there’s no sign of another bullet.

This is bad! Really bad! If I land now, I’m done!

I’ll hit the ground defenseless above her. I meant to end it with that shot. I jumped too high without thinking!

I see Bimii covering his face. Maybe in a crisis, you get calmer?

"That’s all you wanted to do? Then…"

Seisa-senpai, sounding bored, doesn’t even look at me as she speaks.

"Let me show you my ability… *Killing Art*."

The moment she says her ability’s name, I feel the air tremble.

She activates it without holding any item. I recall Lumina from the newspaper club’s words.

‘Did you know? Activating an ability without an item is an incredible feat. In Mikagura Academy’s history, only one person has ever done it.’

She meant the goddess… Seisa-senpai?!

Suddenly, my vision blacks out. No, am I just blinking?

Time crawls like super slow motion. In that brief moment, I hear the sound of my remaining two crystals shattering.

I can't even guess what her ability is.

When my vision returns, I'm on my knees.

"Good job. Too bad."

Seisa-senpai, still unmoved from her starting spot, looks down at me, almost emotionless.

My crystals are all shattered, fragments raining down around me.

This means no official entry to the Going-Home Club.

Worse—

"No way… back to being unaffiliated…?"

Yes. I've drawn the worst possible outcome, sent back to square one.

*

I don't remember much after that.

I think Seisa-senpai said some comforting words, and Shigure and Asuhi-kun were worried about me as I left the field.

I never imagined I'd be this shocked and down, when my only real asset is my boundless energy.

I was riding high on yesterday's victory without much basis, and now I'm just embarrassed.

"Haa…"

I let out a heavy sigh.

What was that about practicing victory poses? Or catchphrases? That footage was watched by the whole academy.

"I don't wanna go to school tomorrow! I don't wanna leave my sleeping bag!"

The dream of moving into Seisa-senpai's mansion is gone, and being unaffiliated again means scraping by on points.

Why did I splurge on that expensive morning set?! I'm such an idiot!

"Cheer up, Eruna, ryui. Seisa's one of the academy's top fighters. Her showing her ability means she respects you, ryui."

Not far from the battle field, in the shade of a building, Bimii speaks to me as I sit slumped, timing his words to comfort me.

He probably knew this would happen but didn't say anything to keep my spirits up before the fight.

"Haa… If I were cuter, I wouldn't be so unpopular with the students."

"Unpopular, ryui?! That's news to me!"

A mascot character like Bimii is usually fawned over by girls. That he isn't says a lot.

Playing with Bimii lifts my sunken mood a bit.

My academy life's just begun, and I'm staying here no matter what.

I'm not the type to run away after losing and embarrassing myself. If I climb from here and take the top, that'd be super cool, right?!

Thinking that way, I can be my usual positive self, even saying it's better to lose spectacularly now.

But I need to face why I lost. My ability, apparently called *Toy Gun*. I stare at my fingertip and ask Bimii.

"Why didn't it work like with Himi-chan? Did I run out of energy or something?"

Bimii thinks seriously about my honest question.

"There are a few possible reasons, ryui. The most likely one is…"

Before he finishes, a juice carton flies gently toward me.

"Whoa?!"

It almost hits my face, but I catch it with both hands, like a samurai grabbing a blade.

It wasn't thrown with malice, but I should complain. I look at the thrower.

"Yo, newbie. Hiding here crying, huh?"

"Kyoma-senpai?!"

Kyoma Kuzuryu, the art club representative, sips from a milk carton identical to the one he threw.

"I saw your mock battle with Mikagura on the footage. Well, for a newbie, that's about right."

His tone isn't mocking, just a straightforward observation.

I look at the milk in my hands, and he gestures with his eyes to drink it.

"I'm not just a newbie… Well, I am, but I'm Eruna Ichinomiya, a name with proud history!"

"Really that proud, ryui?"

Okay, I made that up, so don't dig into it.

"Yeah, my bad. I didn't remember your name… Eruna. That good?"

Kyoma says gruffly, almost annoyed. Is that a hint of embarrassment in his eyes, or am I imagining it?

"Call me Eruna, Erurun, whatever you like! Oh, and…"

"What?"

He looks like he's dreading more, but this is important—I have to say it!

"I can't drink milk! Can I swap it for another drink? I'm a creature that prefers pricey ones!"

I make an X with my hands, refusing as cutely as possible.

I wink and stick out my tongue with an "ehe!"

"…I respect you, Eruna, ryui. What kind of life gives you that kind of guts, ryui?"

Bimii seems awestruck, but forcing myself to drink it or lying feels rude!

If it comes out later that I hate milk, it'd look bad. It's my way of being honest.

I want him to accept my feelings. And maybe buy me a juice that's better for winning over girls!

But Kyoma's reaction—

"You can't drink the milk I bought you, Eruna?! Huh?!"

He's furious. No mistake, pure rage. Bimii's like, "Well, yeah, ryui," siding with Kyoma.

"Uh, yeah, I just can't… It's not like your buying it changes the taste, right?"

I have no choice but to respond with logic.

Kyoma, beyond angry, looks exasperated. He stomps over, snatches the milk, and starts chugging it himself.

"Listen! Milk's full of nutrients! It's good for you!! Damn it!"

"He's rough, but he's only saying good things, ryui…"

Bimii's right. Kyoma downs the milk, looks around, finds a trash can, and

hurls it in, unlike the gentle toss to me.

He seems like a delinquent, but properly finding a trash can shows his good nature.

"…What're you staring at?"

"Oh, nothing, just thinking you really love milk!"

I smile, and he mumbles, "It's not like that, milk just gives you energy…" quietly.

When I tried joining the art club, he brushed me off coldly, but I remember him hesitating, like he wanted to give me something.

Was that milk too…? I grin, certain of it.

So, he was trying to cheer me up back then! I nudge him playfully with my elbow.

"Don't get cocky, annoying."

He lightly bonks my head. It's not too painful, but I overreact, "Spare me, eek!"

For a split second, I think I see Kyoma smile. When I look again, he's back to his grumpy face.

"Don't get the wrong idea. I didn't come here to comfort you or give advice."

He says he saw the footage, happened to pass by, and spotted me.

It seems true—this path leads to the art club room.

But the vending machine's a bit far. Even if spotting me was chance, he went out of his way to buy milk for me. That makes me genuinely happy… even if I can't drink it.

"You saw the match, right, Kyoma-senpai? What do you think was my downfall?"

I recall I was discussing this with Bimii and want to hear from Kyoma, the art club rep.

It might be harsh, but I want to hear opinions to grow from this.

My serious tone makes him pause, thinking.

"Let me ask first. Why do you think you lost, Eruna?"

"Well… because my ability didn't work properly, I guess."

I look at my fingertip again. My physical skills were useless. I should've used the terrain better. There are tons of reasons.

But the biggest blow was my ability fizzling out.

"Yeah. But to me… or anyone watching, it's obvious. Your ability not working was inevitable."

Bimii chimes in, adding to Kyoma's words.

"Normally, you need an item to activate an ability, ryui. Seisa's special, beyond the norm."

But I did it without an item against Himi-chan!

As if reading my mind, Bimii wags his tail and explains.

"Normally, you wouldn't even get a half-baked activation like today without an item, ryui. You should realize how amazing that is, ryui!"

Kyoma nods silently, agreeing grumpily. Scratching his dyed blonde hair, he says he doesn't want to boost my ego but—

"In other words, your ability's still incomplete, Eruna. If you had an item, who knows what could happen. I can't even imagine it."

He turns away, muttering, "Damn, shouldn't have said that."

"So, it's incomplete, huh? Once this rare ability's complete, Eruna-chan'll rule the world!"

Bimii's like, "No one said that, ryui," but I ignore him, thrusting my fist skyward.

"You've got a ton of issues. You're not even using your athletic ability fully. Your ability's shots look irregular, but dodging them's easy enough."

He lists my flaws like he's spitting them out.

But what Kyoma's really saying is…

"It's all about inexperience, ryui. Kyoma-kun's saying you've got potential, just indirectly, ryui!"

"Right? That's what you mean, right?!"

I thought he hated me since the welcome party, so his praise nearly moves me to tears.

"Thanks, Kyoma-senpai! Can I call you Master? Or maybe Paint Yankee… P-Yankee for short?"

"No way! You picking a fight?! Even if my name was Enomoto, I'd hate that!"

I teased out of habit, but I really want to learn from him, even if not as a master.

When I try to express that carefully, he brushes it off and hurries away.

"Can't believe she's that 'Hero Time' Shigure's cousin."

"…What, the cousin thing? Honestly, I don't believe it either."

I say something that'd make Shigure cry. He's not around, right? I glance around.

"…Yeah, you're annoyingly similar in how overly familiar you are. See ya."

Kyoma tosses that out and heads toward the art club room.

On the way, he looks up, as if remembering something, and buys more milk from the vending machine.

"He really loves it, ryui…"

"Look, Bimii, he's buying three! Even a middle school boy worried about his height wouldn't drink that much."

We whisper, watching Kyoma's back, so different from my first impression of him.

*

I walk through the stone-paved plaza, bathed in sunset.

If I listen, I hear students' voices from club activities all around.

Bright voices, tired voices—all brimming with, "I'm living my youth!" vibes. Is that what I'm picking up?

Is there some jealousy because I'm back to being unaffiliated…?

Thanks to the newspaper club, my face is known in an unwanted way, and I feel eyes on me just walking.

This morning, those gazes felt great, but after losing to Seisa-senpai, they're just embarrassing.

"Haa… What now?"

Going back to the dorm means facing my sleeping bag.

I'm not confident I can stay upbeat with that reality right now.

Seeing my mood, Bimii clears his throat, trying to lift the spirits with an overly cheery voice.

"Think back to what Seisa said after the match, ryui! You were too stunned to process it then, ryui…"

I recall my miserable defeat.

Right, my temporary Going-Home Club status is gone, but I wasn't coldly abandoned.

Seisa-senpai gave me a path forward!

"You're unaffiliated again, but the countdown to expulsion is reset. However, temporary memberships and transfers are limited to once a year, so your next club will be your home."

"Bimii, I think you're trying to mimic Seisa-senpai's voice and tone, but can you stop? I don't want to commit a crime at this age…"

I warn him, trembling, barely holding back.

I feel like I could perfectly activate my ability on Bimii right now.

"S-sorry, ryui. I was just trying to lighten the mood, no bad intentions, ryui…"

"That was inches from a crime! You meant to lighten things, not make me want to punch you, right?"

What's that feeling of something precious being tainted…?

Bimii's weird imitation made it hard to process, but Seisa-senpai told me to find a club, my place.

It's like she's saying, "Climb back up to where we can fight again."

My heart surges with renewed vigor. But—

"I tried so many clubs and didn't find a good fit. What else can I do?!"

There are tons of clubs I haven't tried, but I don't have a good feeling about any of them.

I find a bench at the plaza's edge and slump onto it.

The antique white bench, dyed by the sunset, looks like a painting.

"With Eruna there, it goes from a painting to a gag manga, ryui."

"Shut up!"

I'm trying to think seriously! I huff, and Bimii, following his joke, says lightly,

"If you can't find a club, why not start your own, Eruna, ryui? I'll be the advisor!"

He says it casually, not forcing or acting superior.

I'm stunned, unable to react.

"Mikagura Academy's super free, ryui. As long as it's a cultural club, they'll approve almost any activity, ryui."

And, "I want to see what kind of club Eruna creates up close, ryui," he says shamelessly.

That option was totally off my radar, so it doesn't click at first.

But…

"My own ideal club, huh…"

The more I imagine it, the more hyped I get!

The strong club reps I saw at the welcome party. If my club could stand among them.

And if I, as its rep, could go toe-to-toe with them.

Those days would be thrilling! My dreams keep expanding.

Bimii, maybe imagining the same, just smiles at me.

"Sorry for always thinking your smile's creepy. You're cool today, Bimii!"

"You thought that, ryui?!"

We laugh and start discussing the future. I haven't said I want to start a club yet, but with such an appealing idea, there's only one answer.

"You need at least three members to start a club… right? It's tough to gather people this late."

Some time’s passed since new students arrived. I rarely met others looking for clubs during my trial visits.

"Plus, you just got tons of attention for losing that mock battle, ryui."

"Yeah, who’d want to join a club started by a weakling…"

A club’s strength in battles affects everyone’s points.

No one would choose a weak club on purpose.

But that’s exactly why—

"The higher the hurdle, the more it fires me up!"

With a clear goal, my motivation surges.

I stand on the bench, getting scolded by Bimii, a teacher, for it.

The sun sets, the day ends, but in contrast…

I’m filled with the feeling that a vibrant story’s about to begin!

"There’s a perfect event to appeal to potential members, ryui!"

Bimii excitedly tells me about the Rookie Battle, a tournament all first-years, even unaffiliated ones, must join.

It decides who’s the top first-year right now.

Will it be a promoted middle schooler, or is there hidden talent among the entrance exam students?

It’s a big battle said to shape Mikagura Academy’s future.

"If I do well, I’ll get attention and maybe attract members, right?!"

"Exactly, ryui!"

The more I hear, the more my blood pumps.

Doing well? That’s too tame.

I’m aiming for the championship!

I’ll win every match and make my new club known across Mikagura!

"Woo!" I shout, my long shadow joined by Bimii’s.

Just two shadows now, but I swear to add awesome teammates, deciding firmly at the end of this long day.

"I’ll build the greatest club ever!"

"Ryui!"

Bimii’s half-hearted cheer makes us laugh as we lock eyes.

Yeah, this is gonna be fun!

No doubt about it!

Chapter Three: Ecstatic Vivace

“Lost again! I couldn’t even break a single crystal! They won’t even let me touch them?!”

“Heh heh heh! No matter how many times we go, you’re not beating me anymore! Also, stop trying to sneak a feel in the chaos, Eruna-chan!”

How should I make an impact at the Rookie Battle?

The conclusion from my all-night talk with Bimii—well, that’s a glorified lie. It’s a terrible lie to make myself seem like a hard worker. In reality, it was decided in seconds: “Just relax and get some practical experience!” So, we settled on piling up mock battles to gain experience points!

But if this were an RPG, you’d start by fighting slimes. My current sparring partner, though, is more like a dragon. Jumping straight to a dragon is way too much!

“Could you maybe liken me to a slightly cuter monster? Or, better yet, stop comparing me to monsters altogether!”

“Sorry, Himi-dragon! Don’t breathe fire at me!”

“I’m not breathing fire!” huffed Himi Yasaka, the calligraphy club representative, puffing up angrily.

She’s my training partner today.

Since I beat her once, I thought I could hold my own in practice. But nope, I’m not even close to her level.

No matter how many rounds we go, I haven’t managed to break a single crystal.

“Phew, good thing I changed! I’m soaked with sweat! Totally drenched!”

“Drenched!”

Himi seemed to love the sound of that word, repeating it with a gleeful giggle.

Changing into my tracksuit, as Bimii suggested, was definitely the right call.

“What, my uniform’s no good? Does Bimii have, like, a tracksuit fetish? You probably shouldn’t tell people that.”

“I don’t have that kind of weird hobby, ryui! Himi’s looking at me like I’m a pervert, so stop saying stuff that causes misunderstandings, ryui!”

Despite that exchange, I’d reluctantly changed into my tracksuit.

But while I’m drenched in sweat, Himi’s face is cool and composed, not a bead of sweat on her.

“That’s the real skill gap, ryui. Even with your crazy athletic potential, you’re not using it well yet, ryui.”

We’re in a mock battle practice room, repurposed from an empty classroom. How many hours have passed since we started?

I’m completely exhausted, leaning against the wall, as Bimii lectures me.

“Mikagura Academy’s curriculum doesn’t teach you how to fight in battles, ryui. Everyone learns from their club seniors or through real combat experience, ryui.”

Being unaffiliated and a high school transfer puts me at a huge disadvantage.

Himi’s kindly sparring with me today, but as the calligraphy club rep, she can’t do this every day.

At first, some calligraphy club members were watching from the window between the practice room and the hallway, but now they’re all gone.

Maybe they came to see what Himi’s one-on-one coaching with a newbie was like and were disappointed. It’s hard not to slip into negative thoughts.

“Okay, any more would be overdoing it, so let’s take a break! While Eruna-chan changes, I’ll do a fortune-telling for you!”

Himi declares this, swinging her giant calligraphy brush dramatically.

“Shower and change back into my uniform… got it! …Wait, fortune-telling?”

Fortune-telling, like *that* fortune-telling, right? The kind where you’re watching morning TV, and the cheerful anchor says, “Today’s lucky item is… a crowbar-like thing!” and you ask your mom, “Hey, do we have a crowbar-like thing at home?” and she drags you to the hospital? That was definitely horoscope stuff, I think. If everyone with my zodiac sign believed that and went out carrying crowbar-like things, it’d be pure horror. Total apocalypse vibes.

I haven’t trusted fortune-telling since, but I’m still a girl. Hearing “fortune-telling” piques my interest.

“It hits or it’s a miss—either way, it’s cool!” Himi says, humming a vague proverb-like phrase while pulling out ink, calligraphy club style. She’s apparently using her giant brush, which doubles as her weapon, to do the fortune-telling and starts preparing.

“Himi-chan’s fortunes are famously inaccurate around the academy, ryui! Eruna, just take it lightly, ryui!”

“Bimii, too loud! Himi-chan’s visibly depressed now!”

Himi, setting up for the fortune-telling, looks like the world’s ending—way too pitiful.

Bimii’s lack of tact might be a talent in itself…

“W-Well, then, how about a love fortune? Please and thank you!”

I head toward the shower booth, leaving the gloomy atmosphere behind. Bimii, stuck in the heavy mood, looks at me with pleading eyes, but too bad! He can reflect there by himself!

“Phew, all refreshed!”

Back in my uniform, I return to the practice room to find a scene so sad I can’t believe my eyes.

Honestly, if I could, I'd pretend I saw nothing and run away. But that won't do.

"I'm back… Um, what happened while I was gone?"

Bimii's sitting stock-still, his face painted with the giant kanji for "repentance" in ink.

…Is this a dogeza?

Himi's puffing her cheeks, facing away with a hmph.

Sure, Bimii's a weird creature, but he's an adult and a teacher.

And yet, he's in a dogeza. It's like witnessing something forbidden. I silently snap a photo, thinking it might come in handy.

"No photos, ryui!" Bimii wails pitifully, but Himi's glare silences him.

"Hehe, just kidding! I wouldn't get mad over this!" Himi spins in place, flashing a bright smile.

"Good, then, ryui," Bimii adds in a barely audible whisper, "but this ink for 'repentance' on my face doesn't come off easily, ryui…" He forces a polite smile to get through it.

While Bimii struggles to wipe off the ink, Himi starts the fortune-telling as if the tense atmosphere never existed.

"Eruna-chan's love life, right? Hang on, I'll do it quick! …Here we go!"

She lays out a huge sheet of paper, dipping her brush in ink while seemingly deep in thought. Then, out of nowhere, she starts singing.

"Green peppers, I hate 'em♪ So I'll give 'em all away♪ Good for your body?♪ Don't care about that♪"

Humming, she gracefully moves her brush across the paper.

"Okay, your calligraphy's amazing, but what's this song got to do with fortune-telling…?"

And she's not using any items for the fortune-telling—what kind is this?

"Done!♪"

"Done?! Already?! What was that song even for?!"

Himi just looks smugly satisfied, ignoring my questions.

It feels like the mystery will stay a mystery.

She never asked for my birthday, zodiac, or blood type—stuff you'd expect for fortune-telling.

I have no clue what she based this on, but Himi's cute, so it's fine!

For me, "cute" is reason enough to excuse most things.

"What's it say, ryui?" Bimii, finally ink-free, floats over curiously.

"Let's see…"

I read the text aloud.

"Give Himi-chan delicious snacks. Ideally every day without fail. Do so, and you'll have great encounters."

This isn't a fortune—it's just Himi's wish! And why's the writing spilling off the paper?! Bad brush control? No control at all?!

I glance at Himi, who's proudly making double peace signs. I haven't praised anything…

"Th-Thanks…?"

I say thanks to move on from the fortune-telling topic.

"You're welcome! You can frame this and display it!" Himi beams.

Do I really have to display it? Will I be cursed if I throw it out…?

"Good, you're still here!"

As I roll up the fortune paper, still unconvinced, a soft knock precedes a boy entering the practice room.

A delicate, blue-haired pretty boy. The newspaper club's contradictory "Boys You'd Want as a Little Sister" ranking crowned him with overwhelming votes for his high feminine charm—Asuhi Imizu, a fellow freshman.

“Asuhi-kun! What’s up?”

The astronomy club freshman seems to have rushed here, setting down a heavy telescope and catching his breath before speaking hurriedly.

“I heard from a calligraphy club classmate that Eruna-san was training hard here! I might not be much help, but I came to offer to spar!”

Apparently, one of the calligraphy club members who was watching earlier spread the word, and he came running.

Wow… Is it okay for such a pure soul to exist? If something bad happens to him, dear God, please pin it all on Bimii!

“Eruna, did you say something, ryui?”

“Nope, just wishing for your happiness, Bimii. That’s all.”

Bimii’s oddly sharp sometimes, so I need to be careful.

Still, since Himi was my only sparring partner today, I was hoping to face someone closer to my level.

As a fellow freshman, Asuhi might be a fair match. He doesn’t look strong at all. I’ve already changed out of my tracksuit, but I might even win without breaking a sweat!

“Alright, can we do one round? Bimii, referee again, please!”

I stretch and activate the practice room via my terminal.

Himi cheers us both on, switching to spectator mode from the hallway, and I wave confidently as the countdown begins.

“Let’s do this!” Asuhi bows politely.

“Yep, I’m going full throttle, so keep up!”

The countdown ends, and the battle starts.

I plan to test him with my speed, but right then—

“…Whoa?”

Asuhi’s holding his telescope like a cannon.

“Go! *Shooting Star*!!”

…The result? The mock battle ended in one shot.

“I’m so sorry! I didn’t mean to!”

Asuhi frantically apologizes as I lie flat on my back.

“It’s fine… I’m just too weak. You didn’t do anything wrong… Heh…”

I laugh self-deprecatingly, and Asuhi trembles, bowing repeatedly.

“I didn’t think it’d end in one hit! So easily… No, I mean, sorry!”

His innocent comments stab deep into my heart.

I didn’t expect to be knocked out in one shot either! I was just a target! It wasn’t even a match!

“Asuhi-chan’s ability has been a one-hit KO since middle school, so no surprise there,” Himi says, letting me rest on her lap, patting me to calm me down.

Asuhi’s overwhelmed by her praise and keeps apologizing to me—it’s a mess.

“These two are a bit too high-level for a beginner’s sparring partner, ryui… But there’s a lot to learn from defeat—”

“Nothing! I lost so fast I only learned the meaning of despair!”

I’m too frustrated to take Bimii’s desperate encouragement.

I feel awful for wasting everyone’s time when I’m this pathetic.

At this rate, starting my own club is a pipe dream…

I want to grow. I bite my lip, wishing it fiercely.

I don't want to feel like this anymore.

But showing only my defeated side and worrying everyone is just as bad.

Alright, I signal myself. Burying my face in Himi's lap, I exclaim,

"Hah! Is this paradise?! Losing gets me here?! Isn't this like losing the battle but winning the war?! Am I a winning girl?! No, a winning *beauty*?!"

I put on a blissful expression, shouting.

The atmosphere lightens instantly. Himi giggles, "No way!" while looking relieved.

"With that personality, Eruna can find value in life no matter what, ryui…"

Asuhi still looks concerned but seems eased by the relaxed vibe.

He came purely to help me train. I can't let such a good kid look sad!

Also, Himi's lap pillow is national treasure-level comfy.

The nation should study this smooth, squishy softness, analyze it, and recreate it as a pillow. And I volunteer to be the analyst! Just getting lap pillows all day? Even a "never wanna work, sleep till noon, game all night, sleep early" girl like me could handle that!

My pink-tinted thoughts must've reached Himi, because she yells, "Heavy! Get off!" and forcibly ends the lap pillow.

"Nooo! My lap pillow! Give it back!"

"When did Himi-chan's lap become yours, ryui…"

The practice room fills with silly banter. Since changing back to my uniform, we've spent way more time goofing off than sparring, which feels problematic.

But my opponents are too strong—or rather, I'm too weak, and battles end

instantly, so what can I do?

I've already changed, so I'll call it a day, but I'm starting to want to learn by watching someone else's match.

Chapter Four: After-School Six

I wanted to live in a place where no one knew the young Yuto Akama.

Mikagura Academy is a boarding school, and the more I researched, the more peculiar it seemed. Enrolling there would let me live apart from my father.

I carefully confirmed that no classmates or childhood friends from my neighborhood would be attending before deciding to enroll.

In a way, I thought this would be a fresh start.

Wearing a brand-new uniform, facing things like battles and the point system—things you only learn about after enrolling—didn't shake me at all.

The fact that no one here knows what kind of person Yuto Akama is means that the personality I present here will define who I am in this place.

The school's sprawling campus has a small river running through it. Looking at my reflection in the water, I scold myself that this kind of face won't do.

Even though I deliberately chose a secluded spot with no signs of people, a carefree voice suddenly calls out from somewhere.

"Where am I~? Who am I~? Ugh, I'm Nyamirin~!"

Her behavior is so concerning I wonder if she's okay. Noticing me, she skips over lightly.

"Lost, lost Nyamirin-san~♪ Is this where my house is~?♪"

"No idea, but living in the middle of a forest like this would be way too whimsical. Probably not."

Since she asked while singing, I answer casually. I might've gotten tangled up with a weirdo right after enrolling.

"Ohh, right! Wait, are you a freshman~? Are you lost too~?"

“I’m a freshman, but not lost. Wait, are you… a second-year? A senior getting lost? No way that’s true, right!?”

I respond with a brightness in voice and expression I never would’ve used before.

Seeing my fake smile faintly reflected in the river, I realize it resembles someone else’s and click my tongue in self-mockery.

…Am I copying my little brother?

I despair at unconsciously mimicking him, thinking that acting like him is the best way to be liked.

Oblivious to my mood, the senior calling herself Nyamirin says,

“You know, getting lost in something happens no matter how old you are～.”

“Sounds profound, but you’re just admitting you’re lost, aren’t you!?”

She tries to brush it off but fails, laughing awkwardly with a “Nyahaha.”

The mobile terminal we receive right after enrolling.

You’d think checking it while walking would prevent getting lost.

As I point this out while leading her toward the school building, she says,

“Hmm, but but～! If I walked without any fun, I wouldn’t have met you, Yuto～! So being lost isn’t all bad, right～?”

I’d only just introduced myself, yet she’s already calling me by my first name. Maybe it’s her personality, but it doesn’t feel bad.

Normally, I’d stay silent, say goodbye after guiding her, and that’d be it.

No, in the past, I wouldn’t have even bothered guiding her. But that won’t do anymore.

“Your outfit, is it some kind of cosplay? Cat-themed?”

I proactively ask about something that caught my attention to keep the conversation going.

“It’s not just cosplay～! I’m in the drama club, so I’m a cat～! That’s why I’m Nyamirin～!”

Her explanation is barely coherent, but I just say,

“Oh, I see.”

…Is that the right response, me?

But the drama club, huh…

I’ve always avoided clubs requiring teamwork, worried my true self might slip out. If that happened and I went through *that* again…

Still, the idea of acting feels very fitting for me right now.

I didn’t have any particular club I wanted to join anyway.

It’s embarrassing to call it fate, but maybe that’s what this is.

Making up my mind, I turn to the senior calling herself Nyamirin and ask,

“—Can anyone join the drama club?”

*

The days since then have been nothing short of whirlwind.

The drama club was huge, but thanks to Nyamirin’s relentless pestering, I blended in surprisingly fast.

Playing the role of a likable “Yuto Akama”—a version of me that isn’t really me—doesn’t feel like a burden at all.

Maybe living like this from the start was the smarter choice. If I had, my family wouldn’t have fallen apart, and maybe now… I shake my head to dismiss the thought.

There's no point thinking about what's done.

Just act.

Like there's no void inside me…

"Won again~!? A first-year and already a drama club rep candidate~! Good job, good job~!"

No matter how many times I brush her hand away, Nyamirin never stops patting my head.

If I force her to stop or dodge, she gets teary-eyed.

Yet, some days she's cat-like and whimsical, completely ignoring me.

I'm shocked by my unexpected talent—winning consistently in the Rookie Battle and rarely losing in regular matches.

I didn't even fully understand Mikagura Academy before enrolling. I had no idea my ability was like this.

Checking the terminal, I see the points earned from my victories benefiting the drama club members, spurring me on.

"Not enough. More, more!"

Win more, earn more points.

Be needed by everyone.

Each victory visibly increases the trust others place in me.

Being needed by the drama club… it fills me up. It satisfies me.

It didn't take long to become a central figure in the club.

I kill my true self to avoid making enemies, to not be hated by seniors, and smile.

The large private room granted for my battle achievements.

It’s a cold, empty room.

Cluttered with stuff, it lacks any sense of life.

No bed, so I sleep on the sofa.

I rarely invite anyone over.

I’ve heard rooms usually reveal the personality of their occupant, whether man, woman, or child. But this room is lifeless, probably devoid of any “me.”

A heartless room, I think.

Nightmares plague me almost every night, keeping me awake. Flashbacks of childhood memories.

…My brother smiling at me.

“I don’t need the real me anymore.”

Waking from nightmares, I check my smile in the mirror.

Each time, I recall my brother—the reference for my smile—trapping me in a sad cycle of more nightmares.

The school newspaper often features articles on promising middle school students.

Lately, one boy keeps catching my eye.

—Asuhi Imizu, Astronomy Club.

“Even knowing it’s not him, I can’t help but notice. He’s too much like *him*.”

His appearance, his innocent smile.

It’s so much like my brother’s.

I can’t help but focus on every article about Asuhi.

We've never met, and he's done nothing wrong.

But he's definitely the source of my irritation.

Getting annoyed at myself for being irritated only makes it worse.

He'll likely move up to Mikagura Academy High School next year from middle school.

If he's skilled, he'll surely become the astronomy club rep.

That means we'll inevitably cross paths more often.

I'm already dreading that day.

*

"Starting today, I'll be in your care! I'm Eruna Ichinomiya! Nice to meet ya!"

The drama club after school. With such a large club, they have multiple clubrooms, and it's rare for everyone to gather.

Today, I'm greeting people in a room that's more of a hangout than a practice space.

Only a few seniors, including Yuto and Nyamirin, are here as instructors, with mostly first-years gathered.

So, I keep my greeting casual but polite enough.

"Eruna's honorifics when talking to elders are so sloppy, she sounds like some weird moe character, ryui," Bimii teases.

That's unfair. I avoid honorifics because I'm bad at them, but I'm confident I can use them at a super high level.

"Then watch this! I'll perfectly greet Yuto over there, who's making a 'do we need this conversation?' face, with flawless honorifics!"

The drama club's watching. I gotta show I'm a capable girl. Gotta make an impression.

“…Good day, O-O-Oka…ma-kun.”

“That’s creepy…! And you totally bit your tongue trying to say Akama! You messed up in the worst possible spot!?”

I delicately lift my skirt’s hem and give a small bow. This is definitely proper etiquette. I saw it in an anime.

And I didn’t bite my tongue.

“Didn’t bite! I’ve never bitten my tongue in my life!”

“You just bit again, ryui. You’re biting so much it’s scary, ryui.”

I’m scaring myself…

Yuto looks exasperated, but other club members casually return my greeting at their own pace.

“Well, our club’s got a lot of… unique personalities, so we’re used to newcomers like this,” Yuto says, rephrasing to cover a slip.

He’s basically calling me weird, but I can’t deny it, so I let it slide.

“Yuto’s always working hard～! Good job～!” Nyamirin says.

“I’m working hardest because of you, Nyamirin! Stop clinging to me! Quit playing games to enjoy my reactions!”

It seems Nyamirin’s the one person Yuto can’t handle, and he’s completely defeated.

“Eruna-chan, call me Nyamirin～!” says the cat-themed senior I’ve met and talked to before. Her model-like figure is something I admire as a fellow girl.

“Nice to meet ya, Nyamirin-senpai!”

“Ehh, why’re you staring at my chest～?”

Her tall, slender frame with one very prominent feature is hard to ignore.

Looking at Nyamirin-senpai fills my heart, makes me want to borrow her chest, and gets my heart racing… all in a different sense, though.

Yuto's the drama club rep, loved by everyone regardless of year, but Nyamirin seems just as adored.

Her soft, relaxed vibe draws you into her pace.

"With so many members, having everyone introduce themselves would take too long and make me sleepy~," Nyamirin says, stifling a yawn, adding she'll only introduce those joining or helping with the beginner's workshop.

"That's probably best, ryui. I don't think Eruna could remember this many names and faces, ryui~," Bimii says.

"I can't remember all the members either~! We're a matching pair~!" Nyamirin agrees happily, showing no guilt.

"Nyamirin, try to remember? At least memorize your fellow drama club members…" Yuto says reasonably, looking around.

"That's right! Nyamirin-senpai gave us all nicknames, so forgetting them is harsh!" says a boy bouncing excitedly, clearly upset.

"Oh, I'm Usa-maru, a first-year like you! We'll be in the beginner's workshop together, so let's be great rivals! Woo, it's so youthful!" says the boy with rabbit-themed items.

"Nice to meet ya, Uza-maru… right?"

"No way, not okay! Don't name me based on your first impression! It hurts!"

I didn't mean to, but maybe my subconscious thought his enthusiasm was a bit annoying.

Being a fellow first-year, I'd like to get along. My second impression is he's straightforward… First impression? Annoyingly intense.

"Ugh, rabbits get youthful when lonely…?" Usa-maru sulks.

“First I’ve heard of that! Isn’t being youthful a good thing? Then getting lonely is fine!” I retort.

He perks up, bouncing again. “You’re right! A change in perspective! Woo!”

He’s hyped up alone. The club members are used to it, ignoring him. Only Nyamirin says, “What’s a change in perspective～? Like agar? Tasty～? I like orange-flavored agar～,” showing a bizarre appetite.

Seeing Yuto lightly hold his head, I glimpse his struggles.

“Usa-maru’s a high school transfer like Ichinomiya-chan. He’s got some theater experience, but he’s a total beginner in battles. With so many first-year members, he’s someone you can grow with step-by-step,” Yuto adds.

Hearing he’s a transfer makes me feel an instant connection.

Then Nyamirin drags over a boy in a mask. “This first-year too～! Come on, Tonkyun, say hi～!”

Prompted, he finally looks at me. His expression’s hidden by the mask, but he gives off a cool vibe.

“…Um, senpai. Can we cancel the Tonkyun nickname? Return it somehow?” he says in a low, calm voice, sounding like a plea but oddly emotionless.

The boy called Tonkyun seems unhappy with his pig-themed items and nickname.

“Ehh～? But pigs are tasty～! So tasty, and that’s no good～?” Nyamirin says.

“…You’re totally seeing me as food. You were drinking pork soup when you named me, right?”

He cuts in calmly, not rapid-fire. Remembering to introduce himself, he bows slightly with his eyes.

The contrast with Usa-maru is so stark I’m unsure how to respond. Still, I try a proper greeting.

“Thanks for the meal, Tonkyun!”

“Could you not see me as food either? That’s a weird greeting.”

I accidentally greeted him like he’s food. He responds evenly, which is amusing.

“Sorry, my bad, boo!”

“I’ve had enough of pig-themed suffixes since joining, thanks to Akama-rep and Nyamirin-senpai. Doesn’t faze me anymore.”

Yuto and Nyamirin already did that… Yuto probably did it to help new members relax, but Nyamirin likely did it for fun.

“By the way, Tonkyun doesn’t like meat and eats mostly salads~! A herbivore boy~?” Nyamirin says.

“Let’s have the courage to drop the Tonkyun nickname,” he replies.

Nyamirin, with no intention of changing it, and the expressionless Tonkyun create a surreal scene.

But Tonkyun’s nickname has quite a punch.

Will he be Tonkyun for all three years in the drama club? No chance of evolving to Ton-san?

If I’d joined, I’d be Gorina. The thought alone makes me want to skip school.

Imagine competing as Gorina in battles.

I’d equip gorilla-themed items with my uniform, and my catchphrase would be,

“Tension MAX! UHOHO□□□□□!” (pounding chest wildly)

No way.

The newspaper club's Lumina-chan would write a headline like:

*'Gorina Roars!! *Do Not Feed Her'*

It'd be less a battle article and more a zoo warning!

If I get attached to the drama club after this workshop, I'll recall this to stop myself from joining.

"And one more. A second-year, so an instructor. Oi, Kumano-san! Where are you!?" Yuto calls, looking for someone named Kumano-san.

A senior, huh? Maybe a burly guy, given the bear theme. I imagine a macho foreigner, slightly balding, maybe 35. Why's such a student at Mikagura!?

As I freak out over my wild imagination, a cute girl in a bear headpiece arrives.

"Sorry, sorry, was grabbing food! Kumano-san gets ferocious when hungry!" she says in an adorably childish voice, nothing like a bear. I resist the urge to hug her.

"We've met a few times, but nice to meet you! I'm Kumano-san, drama club second-year!" she says, smiling and offering a handshake.

I shake her hand. "Whoa, tiny hands!? And super smooth skin! I thought you'd be bear-like, but you're not!"

Her bear-themed outfit is clear, but I imagined a hairy, macho foreigner, so the gap's huge. And she's obviously not 35.

Saying so, Kumano-san trembles in shock.

"No way, Usa-maru! Kumano-san's been working hard to match the bear character Nyamirin-senpai gave her! Saying she's girly or has a childish voice makes her mad!" Usa-maru says smugly.

The more I hear, the cuter she seems!?

Kumano-san, upset at the truth, lightly smacks Usa-maru, but it looks like a small animal playing.

“Be quiet, Usa-maru! Kumano-san’s strong!” she insists, teary-eyed, diving into Nyamirin’s chest, crying. Like a kid!?

Nyamirin pats her head, and she looks blissful. What kind of bear is this!? And there’s one more thing I can’t ignore.

“Can I ask? Doesn’t your ‘ttsutte’ suffix feel a bit forced…?”

I raise my hand to ask. It feels weird to let it slide since we’ll spend time together in the workshop.

“Oops? …I don’t know anything!” Yuto says, escaping with a look of not wanting to get involved.

Usa-maru backs away, sweating.

“…Ugh! I hate, hate, HATE it! I know my suffix is weird! But it’s the only way I could think to stand out in the drama club!” Kumano-san says, dropping the suffix entirely and throwing a pork bun at me.

“…Ouch.”

But it misses and hits Tonkyun. A pork bun hitting *Tonkyun*? His expressionless face shows a hint of sadness.

“And my nickname includes the ‘san’! Calling me just Kumano is rude! As a junior, use honorifics!” she adds, ignoring the pork bun and complaining about her name.

“So… with honorifics… Kumano-san-san…?”

I check hesitantly, and she shouts, “No! I’m a bear girl who says NO, ttsutte!”

Her angry voice is too adorable, and her cautious return to the suffix is charming. But I stay quiet, sensing she might stop talking to me if I mention it again.

“You thought that about my suffix, ryui…” Bimii says, looking hurt for some reason. I’m used to *his* unnatural suffix by now…

“Call me Kumano-san-senpai or Kumano-san-chan, ttsutte!” she says.

“‘Chan’ counts as an honorific!? And that makes it sound like ‘Kuma-no-San-chan,’ with ‘san’ as part of the name!” I retort.

I stop there to avoid upsetting her further and settle on calling her Kumano-san-senpai.

Her personality’s unique enough without the weird suffix.

What a field of monsters the drama club is.

Once things calm down, Yuto returns, timing it perfectly.

“So, these are the beginner workshop members. Ichinomiya-chan, Usa-maru, and Tonkyun are learners. Me, Nyamirin, and Kumano-san are instructors.”

Three learners, three instructors—a balanced group.

I beckon Usa-maru and Tonkyun to line up beside me.

On my cue, “Ready, set!”

“‘Please, take care of us!’”

We bow in unison—Usa-maru energetically, Tonkyun slowly.

Yuto and Nyamirin smile back, while Kumano-san-senpai, still aiming for a strong bear vibe, nods grandly with arms crossed.

I’ll be coming here after school, seeing these faces daily.

I’m way behind in my goal to start my own club.

I’m fine with classes, but finding a club took all my energy, and others are likely ahead in battles.

I need to absorb everything taught!

…And I’ve been curious about Yuto.

Not in a girly way, but about something he's hiding.

"Something wrong, ryui? Eruna?" Bimii asks, noticing me staring at Yuto chatting with club members.

"Nothing!" I reply, joining the group.

"I wanna awaken my ability soon! Something fiery and youthful like Akama-senpai's!" Usa-maru says.

"That's how you see my ability…? Youthful…?" Yuto narrows his eyes, checking his scythe.

"Kumano-san's training is tough, ttsutte! Be ready, ttsutte!" Kumano-san says.

"No, be kind to juniors~! Tsk!" Nyamirin scolds.

"Y-Yes…! I'll be kind, so prepare, ttsutte!" Kumano-san flips instantly at Nyamirin's words.

"Then stop bringing pork dishes to lunch as harassment," Tonkyun says calmly.

"It's not harassment! I just like them, so it can't be helped! I mean, can't be helped, ttsutte!" Kumano-san, flustered, forgets her suffix, blushing.

The contrast between Tonkyun's calm and Kumano-san's panic is surreal.

"We need a name for this group. 'Beginner Workshop Group' is too long," a club member suggests hesitantly.

True, a clear name would help others in the club.

"Sounds good. 'Workshop Group' works," Yuto says lazily.

No way, that's lame! If someone mishears it as "Bad Breath Group," it'd be humiliating.

"I got a great idea! A brilliant one! Bright, not dark!" Usa-maru says.

"Usa-maru's ideas never get picked…" Tonkyun mutters.

“That’s… true, but this one’s good! ‘After-School Six’! It’s perfect for six of us!” Usa-maru says, eyes shining smugly.

“That’s… lame…” Yuto mutters, but hesitates to outright reject a junior’s idea.

I love it! It builds camaraderie. I want to praise Usa-maru wholeheartedly.

“Let’s go with it! Hey, everyone, gather up!” I whisper to the six, out of earshot of other club members.

“Seriously…?” Yuto says.

“Nya～! Sounds fun, let’s do it～!” Nyamirin cheers.

“Sounds strong, ttsutte! Kumano-san’s good at this, ttsutte!” Kumano-san adds.

Yuto’s reluctant, Nyamirin’s excited, Kumano-san’s enthusiastic. Usa-maru’s thrilled, shouting, “Youthful vibes!” Tonkyun nods expressionlessly.

“Here we go, ready!” I signal.

“After-School Leader… Yuto Akama… Why am I doing this…?”

“After-School One! Nyamirin! So fun～!”

“After-School Two! Kumano-san, ttsutte! Roar～!”

“After-School Three. Tonkyun. My real name is…”

“After-School FOOOOUR! Usa-maruUUUU!”

“After-School Five! Eruna Ichinomiya! All six together—!”

“‘After-School Six!!!!!!’”

We shout in unison, striking poses, then switching to another.

BOOOOM! I imagine an explosion sound effect.

Nailed it, totally nailed it.

Tonkyun tried to say something, but Usa-maru's voice drowned him out.

The club members, confused but swept up, give scattered applause.

"I wanna go home… We've only done introductions, but I'm done…" Yuto mutters, head down, still posing.

Then he spots Lumina-chan from the newspaper club with a camera, turns pale, and chases her.

With Yuto's popularity, that photo might become a scoop.

It's a great chance to announce After-School Six's launch.

*

"It's like training in a shonen manga! So exciting!" Usa-maru says.

How many days have passed since After-School Six's beginner workshop began? Each day's so intense, time feels short.

We learn theory, practice, and battle strategies—tons to absorb.

I'm not fond of studying, but my grades are decent, and I'm often praised for quick learning, so keeping up isn't hard.

Usa-maru's struggling but thrives in adversity, always the most energetic.

"The seniors are late today. Probably busy," Tonkyun says, keeping his pace, not sweating through the workshop.

I've seen him quietly reviewing alone after everyone leaves.

He still asks to be called by his real name, but some interruption (like Usa-maru shouting) always blocks it. Fate, maybe?

Usa-maru and Tonkyun are opposites but oddly get along. Spending so much time together, a bond's forming among us three.

"Everyone's missing. I'll check the After-School Six space," I say, pulling

out my terminal.

This multifunctional terminal lets you create chat spaces for groups. We made one for After-School Six right after introductions, using it for contact.

Yuto, Nyamirin, and Kumano-san are busy, so workshop times vary. We get notifications via the space.

I can't complain since they're teaching us out of kindness, especially since I'm not even a drama club member.

"I posted in the space, but no response. Not even read!" I say.

"Let's self-study and wait, ryui~," Bimii says, sipping tea.

What's the age of this creature, a supposed Mikagura teacher? Sometimes he feels my age mentally, other times oddly mature.

When I asked once, he wiggled and said, "How old do I look, ryui?" with a pointless quiz, so I punched him.

Never got his age.

"Like Bimii-sensei says, let's self-study! I'll focus on awakening my ability!" Usa-maru says.

Abilities often awaken during battles, but sometimes in daily life. Usa-maru wants his soon, since Tonkyun and I already have ours.

Mine's incomplete without an item, though…

You can learn abilities from seniors, but they're limited, not matching the senior's level, so few do it.

Usa-maru's one, saying, "I want a protagonist-like ability! Originality's a must!" shyly.

Originality? Like original tea? Maybe he means originality? I let it slide, so he still says, "Originality! My own originality!"

Lovable idiot.

What should I study? As I ponder, Tonkyun says, “That’s Akama-rep out there, right?”

We rush to the window. It’s Yuto, surrounded by drama club members, consulting on something.

“He got caught on the way. Members always go to Akama-senpai first,” Usa-maru says.

“Makes sense. The others are probably delayed for similar reasons,” Tonkyun nods.

Yuto’s so loved, it warms my heart. He’s not just strong; he’s trusted. I want to be that trusted when I start my club.

We can’t hear, but he’s relaxed, smiling with them. It’s changing my impression of the constantly teased Yuto.

“Being teased means he’s loved…” I mutter.

“Talking about me, ryui?” Bimii reacts happily, but no.

We decide to self-study while waiting.

Nyamirin arrives first. “Oh～? You’re all early～! What, secret training～?”

It’s been an hour past meeting time. We realize…

Nyamirin-senpai got the time wrong!?

Usa-maru cautiously says, “Senpai, the meeting was earlier. We were self-studying, so no issue!”

“Hmm～? But Yuto and Kumano-san aren’t here either～?” she says.

“They’re… late too… But it’s fine, sorry!” Usa-maru gives up, defeated by her pure, innocent smile.

She looks puzzled, worrying if he hit his head.

Next, Kumano-san arrives, arms full of bags. “Sorry for being late, ttsutte!

Bought food to keep my power up! Got too much, so help yourselves, ttsutte!”

She was shopping, hence the delay. Power? Her tiny body doesn’t look powerful, but I don’t point it out, or she’d cry.

But her purchases… “Stamina pork bowl…” Tonkyun says, inspecting one.

Kumano-san gasps, trembling, realizing her mistake. “Tonkyun, I’m sorry… I didn’t think about cannibalism…”

“I’m not a pig, just pig-themed. It’s not cannibalism. Also, forgetting your suffix makes your apology feel so sincere it’s painful, so please stop.”

Tonkyun’s calm versus Kumano-san’s panic is surreal.

“And call me by my real name…” he starts, but Yuto rushes in, out of breath.

Tonkyun’s name remains unheard.

Yuto tries to explain, but Usa-maru and Tonkyun don’t ask.

Like me, they probably think it’s personal, and prying’s rude.

“We get it! Let’s start now that After-School Six is here!” Usa-maru says.

“Let’s deal with these pork bowls first,” Tonkyun suggests.

“Yes, yes! Eruna Ichinomiya, perpetually hungry due to low points, can handle three!” I declare.

All together, After-School Six!

We chat and eat. Yuto seems natural in this moment.

“He can smile like that…” I mutter.

“Say something, ryui?” Bimii asks.

“Nothing!” I reply, grabbing my pork bowl.

“I don’t eat pork, so take mine,” Tonkyun says, giving me his.

I eye Kumano-san next. “Eating meat makes you bear-strong? No way! It’ll just make you fat…?”

She panics. “R-Really!? Fat… ugh~!” Forgetting her suffix, she silently hands me her bowl.

Her girly instincts trump her bear character. I’m immune to gaining weight, but I keep quiet after past experiences.

As I feared, this place and these people are too comfortable. I don’t want to leave.

Yuto might grimace, but the club would welcome me if I joined.

But I can’t break the promise I made to myself that day.

I can’t rely on After-School Six!

So, we dive into training again today.

*

After classes, I train at the drama club, returning to my trusty sleeping bag with pleasant exhaustion.

“Welcome back, my room! My sleeping bag-chan!”

Since my official Going-Home Club membership fell through, I’ve worked hard to make this spot comfy.

“Hard to notice changes visiting daily, but this is insane, ryui…” Bimii says, stunned.

It’s so perfect I want to make this my club’s base, expanding nearby.

“Fufufu! It started with just a sleeping bag, but now it’s a real room, right!?”

It’s not just guest-ready; it’s brag-worthy.

Points vanish on daily life, so setting this up took effort.

“Rumor is a student haggles fiercely at the weekend flea market, practically stealing stuff. Could it be…?” Bimii says.

It was tough, but it built my castle!

I still sleep in the sleeping bag, though. No bed or futon—changing that feels like I’d get scolded.

As I brag to Bimii, a bell rings. *Chiririririn!*

“A guest?” I say.

“You installed that, ryui!?” Bimii exclaims.

I wanted an intercom, but electrical work was too much, so this was my compromise.

At the entrance, I find, “Himi-chwaaaaan!!! Love you□□□□□!!!”

“W-W-What!?” says Himi Yasaka, calligraphy club rep and my angel.

I try to hug and nuzzle, but she blocks with her giant brush.

“Himi-chan! That’s not how you use a brush! It’s for calligraphy!”

“I use it as a weapon in battles, so anything goes! Anyway, I’m not here to play.”

She looks around my castle.

I changed the wallpaper (without permission) and built cardboard walls (also without permission) to make a 1LDK.

“Wanna live here, Himi-chan? Cohabitate? I’m… okay with it.”

“Not with that dramatic ‘okay’! Not a blushing, reluctant ‘okay’! Geez! You’ve messed with this hallway so much it’s unrecognizable, and it’s stylish, but—!”

Himi scolds, hands on hips, in my room. A perfect scene. The newspaper

club should snap this: *‘Freshman Eruna Ichinomiya and Calligraphy Club’s Himi Yasaka in a Love Scandal!?’* Make it fact!

“So, what’s up, ryui? You said not to play,” Bimii asks, taking over since I’d ramble.

“Right! Not play! I didn’t come to game with Eruna-chan!” Himi says, eyeing my game consoles longingly.

If you wanna play, let’s… She’s tearing up!

“Himi’s here on an errand for the dorm manager. You know what that means…?”

She taps the cardboard wall, making a *bokon bokon* sound.

“Eh… no way… you mean…?”

“Yep, probably exactly that.”

“They want to commend me for how perfect it is!? The manager’s got taste! I approve!”

“That’s not it! Your idea’s too positive!” Himi says.

Really? I think it’s world-heritage-level.

“It means your renovations went too far, ryui,” Bimii says.

“They can’t ignore it! It’s become a landmark!” I say.

“Not like that! By tomorrow morning, tear it down and restore the hallway, or they’ll dispose of it!”

…What.

“Everything?” I ask.

“Yep.”

“Back to just the sleeping bag?”

“Exactly.”

Himi answers energetically, almost desperately, as I stand stunned.

“Himi’ll help a bit, so cheer up, Eruna-chan!”

I can’t process it. I started small, and since no one complained, I thought it was fine…

Destroying it after completion is too cruel.

“The manager didn’t expect this level of chaos, ryui…” Bimii says.

Dismantling my castle takes until late night.

Stuff that doesn’t fit in my locker must be thrown out, so I discard most of it, crying.

“Goodbye, Elizabeth… It was short, but thank you.”

“Talking to cardboard, ryui!? You named the walls!?” Bimii exclaims.

Of course. I was that attached.

“Don’t be mad when I toss you in the burnable trash, Akiko… I’ll join you someday…?”

“The name changed!? Not Elizabeth!? Different nationality!? And too dark!” Himi says, lifting huge loads effortlessly.

I’m so shaken I mixed up names. Not that I forgot them.

Cleanup takes late into the night.

All that’s left is my original sleeping bag.

“You’re all I have left!!” I yell, diving into it.

I’ll stick with this sleeping bag forever, even if I start a club and get a proper room!

“Eruna-chan suits this sleeping bag more than a fancy room,” Himi says.

“It fits, ryui,” Bimii adds.

They whisper as they leave.

Only my sleeping bag doesn’t betray me. I’ll never let go.

…But I need to wash it soon; it’s getting sweaty.

*

The Rookie Battle tournament matchups aren’t announced on the day of the event.

With so many first-years, the bracket is displayed outdoors in a large campus plaza.

Squinting in the bright sunlight, I join the flow of first-years heading there.

Some look nervous, others picnic-happy with friends, each with different tournament vibes.

One week until the Rookie Battle.

After-School Six’s workshop is nearing its final stage.

“Here’s my grand stage! I’ll shine and declare my club’s founding!” I say.

I won’t slack on prep, but I’m pumped. I’m different from before the workshop.

“Eruna’s well-known among contestants, ryui. You beat Himi-chan in an official match. Losing to Seisa later dropped your rep, but you’re still notable, ryui,” Bimii says.

“My losses to Himi-chan and Asuhi-kun in the practice room might tank that rep,” I reply.

We head to the plaza where the bracket’s posted.

You can check opponents and times on the terminal, but Bimii said seeing the huge bracket in person is part of the Rookie Battle.

Many first-years, likely told the same by seniors, come without checking their terminals.

Everything's digital at Mikagura, so this analog tradition feels nice.

"The curtain's still up, but that huge board must be it!?" I say.

A massive board, 3 meters tall and impossibly wide, stands in the plaza's center.

Even from the entrance, it's striking. A crowd's already gathered before the veiled board.

"Almost time for the reveal, ryui!" Bimii says.

"Wanna see from the front! Hurry, Bimii!" I say.

I'm focused on the Rookie Battle, but seeing the board gets me hyped.

I want the front-center spot, but it's mostly taken.

An event during the reveal might be why.

"No open spots… Wait, is that…?" I spot Tonkyun in the front-center, sitting on a picnic sheet like it's a cherry blossom viewing.

No Usa-maru or other club members. Did he come alone? Overeager much?

Pushing through, I sit beside him. "Yo! Sorry, kept you waiting!?"

I act like we planned to meet. Tonkyun says nothing, lowers his mask, and sips a juice carton.

"W-Wait! Tonkyun, calm down!?"

"You're the one who needs to calm down," he says, sipping with his usual low energy.

Right, I'm the one freaking out!

I've never seen him without his mask, despite spending so much time together. I thought there was a reason and even discussed with Usa-maru to avoid mentioning it.

I was so careful. But…

"Under the mask, you're normal!? And kinda gorgeous, Tonkyun!?"

"Normal. What did you expect? A pig nose?"

Not that, but I didn't expect such a refined face.

Pig-themed items and a silly name, yet he looks like a prince.

Mikagura's full of beauties, but he stands out.

He doesn't notice my shock or the girls' glances, continuing to sip.

He shifts slightly to make room for me and Bimii without complaint.

A prince…!? Royalty!?

Stunned by his smoothness, I ask, "No Usa-maru? He'd be the first here for this."

Finishing his juice, he puts his mask back. "He was too excited, got nervous, and locked himself in the bathroom. He wanted to secure a spot, so I came early."

He explains calmly. I worried his flat tone meant he disliked or was mad at me, but now I know it's just his personality.

With the mask back, he's the Tonkyun I know. That princely face was too much—don't show it suddenly!

"Almost time, ryui," Bimii says.

The crowd's grown, including upperclassmen. The Rookie Battle's a big deal.

"Wow, Bimii, it's packed!" I say, shivering with excitement.

Tonkyun seems to smile under his mask. I also picture Usa-maru groaning in a distant bathroom… Nope, don't need that image.

The tournament bracket reveal begins.

Suddenly, it darkens despite being daytime, and fireworks explode with smoke and sound.

"Whoa, what's this!? A festival!? Party time!? Wasshoi!?" I yell, standing up.

I sit back, remembering my front-row spot, but it's fine—everyone's standing.

"Everyone's up, so it's okay," Tonkyun says, standing to watch the fireworks.

The sloped plaza makes the board visible. Well-designed.

"The campus is covered by an invisible dome, ryui. They've made this plaza's section opaque for the event, ryui," Bimii explains.

The fireworks and smoke are just light manipulation, like magic.

After an illusionary dance with dreamy music, the plaza brightens, but the music heats up.

"I expected a solemn reveal, but it's quite a show," Tonkyun says.

The music drowns him out. He's responding to Usa-maru's chats while looking up.

I peek at his terminal. Usa-maru wrote, "I'm almost out, so stop the event until I get there!"

Ridiculous. And TMI about "almost out."

Tonkyun stares, then pockets his terminal, focusing on the bracket like nothing happened.

He's used to handling Usa-maru.

The music lowers, and a familiar voice comes through hidden speakers.

“The Rookie Battle tournament reveal is here! Your MC, Shigure Ninomiya, manga club president and rep, third-year!” Shigure announces.

It’s him. I wanted to pretend it’s someone else, but he said his name.

He’s on a small stage, waving to the crowd.

Girls scream. They’re fooled! Wake up!

I try to hide, but front-center’s impossible. Shigure spots me, eyes gleaming, waving harder.

“So embarrassing… I wanna crawl into a hole…” I mutter.

“That’d kill you, ryui! You mean hide in a hole!” Bimii says.

Shigure’s tough, he’d survive. I knew he’d be involved since he was at the Rookie Battle meeting, but this is too soon!

Fuming at his slick MC skills, I wait for the curtain to drop.

The board’s so big, spotting my name will be tough. Checking the terminal’s easier.

Tonkyun, thinking the same, dismisses Usa-maru’s incessant messages and preps to check his opponent.

“Super exciting! I don’t wanna face drama club folks!” I say.

Unlikely, but it’d be complicated.

“No matter who I face, I won’t hold back,” Tonkyun says, slightly cocky.

“I’ll go all-out too! If it’s Usa-maru, I’ll go beyond!” I reply.

“What’s your grudge against Usa-maru, ryui…” Bimii says.

Shigure’s hyping peaks, and the crowd’s electric, like a concert.

I get why upperclassmen not competing show up.

Battles are a huge deal at Mikagura.

I'm clenching my teeth, itching to fight, ready to explode.

The curtain drops at Shigure's signal, and the plaza erupts. Cheers and groans mix.

Most students check their terminals—opponent info must've been sent.

"Where's mine!? Who's my opponent!? Bimii, how do I check!?" I yell.

"Calm down, ryui! You're shoving the terminal in my face, ryui…" Bimii says.

I'm pressing too hard in my frenzy.

"It's in your email," Tonkyun says, showing his.

"Really! Name, club, photo, and profile!" I say.

His opponent's a brass band girl, not a classmate.

Match time, place, and referee are listed.

"The newspaper club'll publish articles on notable matchups and favorites today, ryui. Comparing those with the bracket's fun, ryui," Bimii says, rubbing his terminal-marked face.

"Sounds like some shady kids might start betting…" I say.

Maybe I'm weird, but with everyone talking about who'll win, it seems likely.

"It's official, ryui!" Bimii says.

"Here," Tonkyun shows his terminal, displaying his and his opponent's info.

"Expectations are shown!? And they're changing real-time!" I say.

Each student has an expectation value that rises with votes.

“Betting odds stay hidden until the winner’s decided, ryui. You bet based on expectations, ryui!” Bimii explains.

The school controls it to avoid underground betting.

You bet points, but is that okay…?

Tonkyun’s expectation is 400, his opponent’s 200. He’s favored, but it’ll shift with articles.

“I won’t be swayed by numbers,” Tonkyun says, glancing at his terminal.

He searches Usa-maru’s name. “Usa-maru’s expectation is… 0.”

“We saw something we shouldn’t have, ryui…” Bimii says.

A glaring zero. Good thing Usa-maru’s not here…

“What’s your opponent?” Tonkyun asks.

“Oh, right!! Forgot!” I say, prompted to check.

Heart pounding, I open the email.

“Hope it’s a cute girl…”

“Thinking it’s a matchmaking photo, ryui!? It’s an opponent!” Bimii says.

I know! Just saying!

Pouting, I open the info. The name displayed is:

Calligraphy Club, Meika Katai

“First round’s Meika-chan!?” I exclaim.

Sleeping bag-chan, Meika-chan. I want to think it’s someone else, but the photo’s unmistakably her adorable self.

How do I save this lovely image… Irrelevant thoughts swirl as I panic.

I knew I might face friends in the tournament, but not first round!

“Matchups avoid same-club members for a few rounds, but otherwise, it’s random, ryui,” Bimii says.

“Got it. Can’t help it…” I say.

My excitement deflates.

I check my expectation value. “Gyaahhh!? Why, why, why!? 4800!?”

I hoped for better than Usa-maru’s, but this is insane.

“You’re a favorite, ryui. Newspaper articles hyped you, and many bet on you. Not surprising, ryui,” Bimii says.

It is! I thought about betting on myself to boost a zero!

It’s impossible, but I didn’t expect this.

“Her expectation’s 200. Don’t let it make you cocky,” Tonkyun says.

He’s right—numbers don’t show true strength.

Students rush to gather info or train. “I wanna move too!” I say.

Shigure’s MC continues, but I can’t focus.

“Today’s a rest day, per Akama-rep. We should follow,” Tonkyun says, calm but with burning eyes.

“Hard work doesn’t always mean strength, ryui,” Bimii adds.

“Maybe, but what do I do with this energy!?” I say.

My profile’s club field is blank. I want to fill it with my club’s name by winning!

As I try to leave, Tonkyun grabs my scarf without looking.

“Hey! It’s Ichinomiya-san!” Meika-chan arrives.

“I was waiting for the bracket reveal, and since Ninomiya-senpai was talking to someone specific, I thought it might be you!” she says.

“Meika-chan! Yeah, Shigure forgot he’s MC and tried talking to me from the stage. Ignored him, of course!” I say.

He was so obvious, Tonkyun asked if I knew him. I said, “Total stranger,” and Shigure sobbed on stage—a pointless incident.

Why’s my cousin always like this? He was different when we were kids. Nostalgia?

“Did you… see?” Meika-chan asks awkwardly, glancing at the board.

She knows I’m her opponent.

How should I respond? What expression?

We met on the first day, same class. She’s supported me through my club trials.

Facing a close friend in the first round. What should I say?

The moment feels eternal, though it’s seconds.

Before I answer, she grabs my hands warmly.

“Hehe, we’re fighting in the first round. Surprising, but let’s make it a good match?” she says, smiling slightly sadly.

I feel silly for overthinking. That’s it.

“Meika-chan, I won’t lose! Let’s go all-out and shake hands again after!” I say.

“Yes!”

“Then hug, kiss, and be sleeping bag buddies again!”

“…No thanks.”

We laugh, promising a fair fight.

Battles are a proper sport with rules. No reason to hold back, even against friends.

Meika-chan shakes off my clinging hands with Bimii's help and leaves.

The day after I beat Himi-chan, Meika-chan celebrated my win at the restaurant.

I want to fight in a way that honors that.

Shigure's MC continues, and the crowd grows post-reveal.

Everyone's fired up, including me, Tonkyun, and probably Usa-maru in the bathroom.

Winning among so many first-years is tough, but that's why it's worth it.

"Look at the stage, ryui. They're introducing top contenders!" Bimii says.

"There wasn't video before," Tonkyun adds.

A large projected video starts, like an artist's promo, grabbing attention.

It's like a fighter's intro, fueling excitement.

A student's training footage plays in quick cuts. When did they film this?

The music speeds up, and Shigure says, "Now, our top picks!"

I pray my bad feeling's wrong.

Shigure, oblivious, introduces students dramatically.

"First, a first-year who's already astronomy club rep! Asuhi Imizu-kun! Current expectation: 9400, the highest this year! The top favorite, set to rise!" Shigure announces.

Asuhi's video plays, showing a different side from his usual calm. A treat for me.

"Asuhi-kun's already rep!? Amazing!" I say.

“Just decided recently, ryui. First-years becoming reps isn’t rare, but for a big, historic club like astronomy, it’s unusual, ryui!” Bimii says.

So angelic and strong? God’s unfair. I wanna throw a party for his rep appointment.

“Next, from the broadcasting club! A sweet voice but sharp moves, highly rated! Haruka Toishi-chan! Expectation: 5200. Can a small club rise?” Shigure says.

Her video looks like candid school life footage, not showing her moves. She’s idol-cute, and boys cheer.

“Good job, cameraman! More! Get low angles!” I yell.

“Eruna’s the most excited, ryui…” Bimii says.

The video ends too soon. More introductions follow, and I’m intrigued by new clubs.

“Now, the last one! My adorable cousin! She promised to marry me as a kid! Unaffiliated but beat Himi Yasaka! The beauty, Eruna Ichinomiya!” Shigure says.

“Stop it!? Stop that intro! I knew you’d expose our relation! Stop it!!” I scream.

My intro video plays. I don’t wanna see!

“What’s this? It’s you, right?” Tonkyun asks, his calm feeling cold.

Through my fingers, I see kindergarten recitals, elementary sports day gym clothes, and Christmas Santa cosplay attacking Shigure for presents.

None of this should be shown here!

“Eruna’s always been Eruna, ryui…” Bimii says.

“Don’t confirm that! Shigure, stop the video!!” I yell, rushing the stage to strangle him.

Others got cheers, but mine gets laughs. I don't want this image! It's my big moment!

Shigure's nearly out, but the video plays my life story to the end, closing the event.

*

Two people watch the chaos from the plaza's edge, far from the stage and crowd.

Smiling warmly at the rampaging girl is the Going-Home Club rep, Seisa Mikagura.

It's her first public appearance since the freshman welcome.

Beside her, using his ability to sit on a large flower, is Sadamatsu Minatogawa, flower arrangement club rep.

Glancing at Seisa's smile, he watches the girl. "Quite a favorite, huh… Why not let her join the Going-Home Club?" he asks, sipping hot tea from a cup.

She ponders, then says, "She has something that draws people in."

With a meaningful, certain tone, she murmurs,

"—I wanted to see where that potential leads."

*

Since the matchups, every day's been hectic.

So intense, I can't sleep despite exhaustion.

Twenty-four hours isn't enough!

The day before the Rookie Battle is my last at the drama club. The setting sun glares into the clubroom. Practice is done, and I'm cleaning up alone, not forced, just wanting to.

Yuto, Nyamirin, and Kumano-san taught me, an outsider, so kindly. Usa-

maru and Tonkyun trained alongside me, their rival.

I'm filled with gratitude.

When I said so, Nyamirin patted my head with her usual soft smile.

Kumano-san, forgetting her suffix, cried, "Stay in the drama club!"

Usa-maru said, "Keep winning to meet in the finals! So youthful!"

Tonkyun said, "I support your club. Come back anytime," smiling without his mask.

Everyone, not knowing his face, froze, shouting, "Tonkyun's not Tonkyun!? Ikemen!? Ikemen Ton!?"

"I'd like to move past the pig thing. My real name is…" he tried, but Usa-maru tackled him.

"Traitor! That face feels like betrayal!" Usa-maru yelled.

It got sentimental, but we ended laughing.

The workshop—After-School Six—ended successfully.

Now, alone, I wait for Yuto, who left after practice.

Everyone else is showering or eating.

"It was so lively earlier…" I mutter.

It was tough but fun.

Cleaning, I find a gorilla-themed accessory hidden in a corner.

"Did Nyamirin-senpai make this for me, just in case I joined…?"

Warmth spreads in my heart. I'm so lucky.

I'd be Gorina, but I can't join since I'm set on my club. I'll ask Nyamirin if I can keep it next time. Yup!

Holding it, I sense someone at the entrance.

“Good work. After-School Six disbands evolutionarily. Thanks to that, the drama club’ll be quieter,” Yuto says, eyeing the accessory.

“Yuto…”

How long was he there? His usual tone, but his eyes seem softer than when we met.

“It’s not goodbye! I’ll bring my club members for a joint camp! Not just After-School Six, but After-School… Million!” I say.

“Million’s a million people! You just liked the sound, right? This place can’t fit that!” he retorts, chuckling.

“—One thing, Ichinomiya-chan. I wanna tell you something,” he says.

“Hm?”

“…You noticed, didn’t you?”

“Huh?”

His smile vanishes, his voice serious.

From that look, I know what he means.

“…Why, even knowing my attitude’s an ‘act,’ do you say nothing? Why don’t you… pull away like everyone else?” he says, as if hurting himself, digging deep, atoning.

Silence envelops the clubroom.

I thought he was forcing himself.

I don’t know his past, nor do I want to pry.

To me, Yuto’s the slightly awkward boy I met at Mikagura, part of After-School Six.

It’s not a big deal.

He's overthinking it.

"Noticing doesn't mean we stop being friends," I say casually.

He stares, mouth agape.

"And… I think the club members know too. They know but like you, including all that."

No one's without flaws. Hiding them isn't weird.

Everyone does it unconsciously, me included.

Yuto's case feels extreme, and he seems guilty for it.

"…What? They know…? No way…" he says, holding his face like a slipping invisible mask.

A crowd of club members, led by After-School Six, floods in.

"…!"

"Yuto, your acting's not as good as you think~! We've known you long enough to notice~!" Nyamirin says playfully.

"Exactly! I don't know your deal, but even a first-year like me can tell! Your usual self being an act doesn't change how much we like you!" Usa-maru says, tearing up.

"No one's leaving the drama club over that, ttsutte!" Kumano-san says.

The members nod vigorously.

Yuto looks around, smiling weakly. "…Got it… Got it…"

He crumples, crying and laughing.

It's not a fake smile—it's Yuto Akama's pure, genuine smile.

No lies in those transparent tears. I truly believe that.

Everyone rushes to Yuto, mobbing him.

I join the chaos.

“…Maybe now I can sleep without sad dreams…” Yuto murmurs, lost in the noise.

*

“Time to drink! Everyone’s here!” Eruna bursts into my room just as I relax.

“Seriously…?” I say.

“Totally!” she says as club members pour in.

They’ve changed into casual clothes, so they went home first.

Not everyone’s here, but my big room’s over capacity.

“What’ll Akama-rep drink? Got tons of juice,” Tonkyun says, calmly raiding my fridge despite being here for the first time.

“Drinking means juice…?” I ask.

“Yup! We’re kids, juice is enough! Cheers~!” Nyamirin says, opening a can.

“Pwah!”

Why’s she acting drunk on juice!?

Others find spots to relax.

“What the heck…” I say, giving up.

This usually silent room is filled with friends and laughter.

It feels strange.

“Usa-maru, check under the sofa! There’s gotta be something!” Eruna says.

“Leave it to me! Akama-senpai’s a guy, he’s got ten or twenty of those books!” Usa-maru says.

They rummage, talking nonsense, so I lightly kick them.

Laughter fills the room.

How long did we party?

I fall asleep and dream.

My brother’s in the frame, as always.

“Yuto-nii, why aren’t you coming? Why?” he asks.

“He’s staying with Dad. Let’s go,” someone says.

I’ve seen this scene countless times. Stop tormenting me.

I want to cover my eyes, but it’s a dream—I can’t.

…But today’s dream has a continuation.

The moment I parted with my brother. It happened, but I forgot.

Why did I hate him deep down?

“Yuto-nii, I don’t get it, but I’ll be back soon, okay? When I’m back, let’s play Miracle Man again!” he says with a friendly smile, worrying about me despite being so young.

He kept turning back, smiling to reassure me until he was gone.

What story taught me no child is born unblessed?

A drama? A novel?

Waking, I recall it was a Miracle Man episode I watched with my brother.

Just fiction, a made-up story, but maybe I can believe in it again.

Rubbing sleepy eyes, I step over sleeping club members to the mirror.

“—Ugh, embarrassing. Am I a brocon…?” I mutter.

I thought I was just copying his smile. But no.

I was chasing the person he’d have grown into.

A tear rolls down my cheek.

“Crybaby like him too,” I say.

Not because I’m acting. Just because we’re brothers.

Wiping tears, I look around. The messy room’s full of sleeping friends.

“No dirty books…? Maybe Akama-senpai likes bo…” Usa-maru mutters clearly in his sleep.

I pinch his nose to make him suffer.

Being cast out, left alone—I don’t need to worry anymore.

I’m not alone.

I return to my spot, close my eyes.

The fear of dreaming is gone.

Chapter Five: The Rookie Battle Begins!

It's finally the first day of the rookie battle tournament.

With tons of matches and it being a major event like midterms or finals, classes are canceled!

So, the first round starts bright and early.

"I wanted to go into this big match relaxed, but why's it like this?! Bimii, you woke me up late!" I complain.

"I didn't know you were sleeping over at Akama's! You weren't in your sleeping bag, so I thought you wandered off sleepwalking!" Bimii retorts.

"Ugh, my bad…"

I sprint through the crisp morning air toward the match venue.

Oh yeah, I forgot to tell Bimii I was at Yuto's.

"When I woke up, it was just me and Nyamirin-senpai left in Yuto's room! I shook her, but she wouldn't budge!"

"She's a third-year, so she's not in the rookie battle. She's fine," Bimii says.

True, but doesn't she want to cheer for her clubmates? Her support could push them beyond their limits. Yes, including me!

Everyone else left early to change or eat, apparently.

I didn't expect Yuto himself to be gone from his own room.

Kumano-senpai left a note: "You guys sleep like the world's ending, so we went ahead! Don't lose today! —Kumano"

Her cute, rounded handwriting made me laugh this morning.

I rushed back to the dorm, got ready at lightning speed, and now I'm running.

Some students with early first-round times are already fighting.

The campus is buzzing like a festival, with food stalls everywhere. A giant airship floats above, its side screen showing live match footage from some venue. Balloons—real or visual effects—dot the sky.

A mascot in a costume hands out special editions from the newspaper club.

Some boys watch matches on their terminals from benches, while girls hurry to their favorite venues. Upperclassmen relax, enjoying the rookie battle as spectators.

“Hey, can I grab some takoyaki real quick?” I ask.

“No way! Check your terminal! Your match is about to start!” Bimii says.

“Aw, but it’s takoyaki!”

“I don’t get why that matters…” Bimii sighs.

I’m tempted but can’t risk being late, so I follow Bimii’s advice and hold off.

I only have one match today, so I can roam the stalls afterward! Win or lose, I want to explore with Kanae-chan.

I dash through the lively main street, using the clocktower as a landmark.

“Eruna, isn’t that Akama?” Bimii points.

“Where?!” I ask, shielding my eyes from the sun to look.

It’s Yuto, on the clocktower roof, waving lightly like he already spotted me.

“Yuto-kun! I’ll use what you taught me and do my best!” I shout, not sure if he can hear from that height.

He moves his lips, saying something.

“What?! I can’t hear you!” I yell again.

He gestures, “Just go already!”

What was he saying? Oh well, seeing him before the match feels like a good omen.

Yuto and the drama club patiently taught me battle basics from scratch.

It’s like he’s giving me one last push.

“I couldn’t hear him, but I read his lips,” Bimii says, looking up happily.

“Thanks,” Yuto had whispered, carried away by the wind.

The venue is like a scaled-down medieval arena, with wide spectator seats, as Tonkyun told me when the matchups were announced.

I scan my terminal to check in.

“No time for the waiting room! Head straight to the arena!” Bimii urges.

“Aw, I wanted to look around!”

Passing through an atmospheric gate and a dark tunnel, I emerge into—

“Wow, this is so cool!” I exclaim.

“This is the arena! I’ll watch from the stands. Do your best!” Bimii says, floating off.

I bow to his retreating back, too shy to say thanks to his face for supporting me and agreeing to be my club’s advisor.

In the stands, I spot Usamaru, Tonkyun, and Kumano-senpai.

Usamaru and Tonkyun’s matches are later, so they came to cheer me on.

“Yay! Watch me give it my all!” I shout, jumping and blowing kisses.

Usamaru dodges them playfully, Tonkyun stays unfazed, and Kumano-senpai blushes, flustered.

I wave to them, then scan the crowd.

With matches happening at other venues, I'm shocked at how packed it is for a first-round fight.

I see Himi-chan leading a calligraphy club cheer squad.

"Just like I've got the drama club, Kanae-chan's got the calligraphy club," I say.

I'm not the only one with supportive friends.

I pull out the gorilla accessory Nyamirin-senpai let me keep, gripping it tightly. I'm confident my preparation and passion match anyone's.

Looking back at the drama club, I see Yuto and Asuhi walking together toward their cheering section.

I can't hear their conversation, but Yuto's smile at Asuhi warms my heart.

They notice me and wave, fists forward, urging me to push on.

"Message received!" I shout, licking my lips and switching into battle mode.

The arena is littered with ruined structures—perfect for cover or hiding.

I don't know Kanae-chan's ability, but I strategize how to handle any attack.

The match has already begun, even before the starting signal.

In the center of the arena, in a clear space, Meika Kanae-chan stands with her eyes closed.

She opens them, smiling, as she hears my footsteps.

“I don’t think it’s bad luck to face you, Ichinomiya-san,” she says.

“Sorry for the wait… What’s that mean?” I ask.

“You’re my classmate, an amazing ability user, and someone I admire. But you’re also the one who defeated Himi-senpai, my club’s rep. I’ve always wanted to face you. Winning would mean overcoming a huge hurdle. I feel lucky to get this chance so soon.”

“It’s flattering to be seen as a hurdle, but this wall’s probably taller than you think! Can you climb it?” I say.

We exchange words, step closer, and shake hands.

Her small, delicate hand is covered in calluses—new since our last handshake after the matchups were announced.

She notices my surprise and smiles again.

Right, I’m not the only one who’s worked hard.

We step back, and the terminal announces ten seconds to start.

“Checked the hype scores? You’re overwhelmingly favored to win,” Kanae-chan says, summoning a slightly smaller brush than Himi-chan’s, turning away but glancing back.

“If I overturn the odds and win, it’ll be a big upset, right? Losing would be… embarrassing for you,” she teases cutely.

“Nope! I’ll make this first round a dazzling victory, Kanae-chan!” I retort.

The starting signal sounds, and a barrier seals the arena, blocking out the crowd’s cheers.

Looking up, the sky within the barrier is cloudy, like a storm’s brewing, though it’s sunny outside.

There are plenty of hiding spots, but I’m not planning to use the same strategy as against Himi-chan.

I want to test my full strength head-on.

As the signal sounds, Kanae-chan backsteps, and I leap onto a ruined pillar, kicking off to soar over her.

“Gotcha!” I shout, aiming a spinning side kick at one of her floating crystals.

“I knew you’d do that!” she says, gracefully deflecting my kick with her

brush.

The kick doesn't reach her crystal, and I land at a distance.

"Impressive, Kanae-chan," I say.

"You too! I predicted your jump, but I couldn't counter fast enough to hit your crystal!" she replies.

What's her next move? If she runs, I'll chase her down. If she hides, I'll play the long game.

But…

"I'm not running or hiding. My stamina's no match for yours, so I'll act while I can!" she says, charging low and swinging her brush at my feet.

"Aiming low?! There's no crystal there…!" I say.

Her straightforward attack catches me off guard, but it's easy to dodge.

I flip sideways to evade and counter, but realize it was a feint.

"This is the distance I wanted! You don't use an item, but my brush gives me reach. At this range, I've got the advantage!" she says, closing in and thrusting her brush like a spear.

"So fast!" I gasp.

Her speed is beyond my expectations, and I can barely dodge, let alone create distance.

Her crystals are too far to reach, even stretching.

"That was your plan!" I say.

"I planned to get you in this range. I won't let you get closer or farther!" she says.

She keeps me at a fixed distance, blocking my approaches and striking if I try to retreat. I'm stuck.

But I'm not out of options. It'll cost me, but I have a plan. It's just a matter of when to act.

We trade blows, maintaining the stalemate.

One moment of carelessness could shatter a crystal. My stamina's draining, but…

"This is fun, Kanae-chan!" I laugh.

Our faces are both beaming, despite the intense fight.

"It is! But to keep it fun and win, it's gotta be me!" she shouts, spinning her whole body to swing her brush.

"Dangerous!" I yelp, redirecting her attack just before it hits my crystal.

The longer we fight, the longer her brush's reach seems to grow.

She's growing at an incredible pace during this battle.

It's scary, but I'm more excited than afraid.

This stalemate hurts me more. I have to act, even if it means a sacrifice!

"I won't let you control this forever!" I say.

"You're not dodging?!" she gasps.

I don't evade her next swing, letting it shatter one of my crystals to dive into her guard.

Her brush can't recover in time, and I grab and destroy one of her crystals.

We're even now—one crystal each.

"No more of that range!" I say.

Sticking close, she can't swing her brush freely. I aim for her crystals, but she guards with the brush's handle.

The momentum's mine now.

If I keep this up, I can win!

But in a split-second lapse—

“I didn’t want to use this, but it’s not that simple,” Kanae-chan says, dancing her brush to write in the air.

That move… I’ve seen it before!

“Is that… Himi-chan’s Lovely Ink?!” I pale, backing off.

“It’s based on Himi-senpai’s technique, but my ability’s different!” she says.

Usamaru mentioned you can learn abilities from seniors, though they’re weaker, so few do it.

“Take this! Cutie Ink!” she shouts.

Her brush strokes create countless black silhouettes of characters. They look like Himi-chan’s, but—

“There’s way too many!” I scream.

Her pieces are smaller but far more numerous, swarming toward me.

The characters are… “Keima”? Like the knight in shogi? I don’t know shogi, so their erratic movements are unpredictable!

I guide them into walls, but their numbers don’t dwindle.

Of course—

“I keep making more while you dodge!” Kanae-chan says, still drawing “Keima” pieces.

Why only that piece? Maybe it’s all she can handle?

“Oh no!” I gasp.

While distracted, a piece hits my crystal.

One crystal left!

The pieces keep multiplying and attacking.

I'm sweating. This is do-or-die.

"I'll end this! For the calligraphy club and Himi-senpai, who taught me this!" Kanae-chan says, speeding up her drawing.

I'm cornered, with only one move left.

"Remember, remember! All that practice with Yuto! I haven't mastered it, but I feel it now!" I say, dodging 360-degree attacks while pointing my finger like a gun.

"No way… That only worked once!" Kanae-chan says, eyes wide.

Exactly. Or rather, it only worked once before.

During beginner lessons, I practiced endlessly to recreate that moment, with Yuto's help.

Even dodging acrobatically, my focus doesn't waver—thanks to training. I picture the After-School Six and thank them again.

My terminal flashes, announcing my ability:

'Ability: Toy Gun'

I feel a surge of heat in my fingertip, stronger than before!

"Here it comes! Max hype, Kanae-chan! Here we go!" I shout, leaping and firing a light bullet.

It tears through her returning pieces, shattering all her crystals in an instant.

"Too crazy…" Kanae-chan says, collapsing in shock.

The energy in my finger doesn't fade.

I point upward and shout, “One more for good measure! Da da da da!”

As the barrier lifts, I fire into the clear sky, the bullet piercing clouds and soaring out of sight.

So exhilarating!

I snap back and hear the crowd’s roaring cheers.

Finally, I feel the victory.

“That was close… I thought I’d lose!” I say, helping Kanae-chan up and shaking her hand.

The crowd’s applause is deafening.

It was a great match.

I didn’t expect her to have that ability.

It must’ve taken blood, sweat, and tears.

“Hehe, I lost. I gave it my all, but it wasn’t enough,” Kanae-chan says.

“No way! You made me realize how much I need to improve. Without that last move, I’d have lost!” I say, genuinely.

If my ability hadn’t activated, I’d be out in the first round.

“But I kept my promise to go all out, so no regrets. Win the tournament, Ichinomiya-san!” she says.

“Yeah! …But how many more wins to the championship? I’ll do my best and train harder!” I say.

Kanae-chan bows politely to the crowd and leaves the arena, hiding tears.

I mutter to myself, “I want to win… No, I have to!”

I run to the stands, shouting, “Thanks for the cheers! Did you see? I won!”

Not just the drama club but random students cheer wildly. What’s this

vibe?

“You’re my rival for a reason! That ultimate move was so cool!” Usamaru says, bouncing excitedly.

“Don’t scare us like that! Kumano-senpai was freaking out!” Tonkyun says.

“I was calm the whole time!” Kumano-senpai protests.

Tonkyun and Kumano-senpai greet me with their usual vibe.

“Morning! It’s over already?” Nyamirin-senpai says, arriving late as ever.

Yuto silently gives a thumbs-up, smiling. Asuhi mimics him awkwardly, making me happy.

The rookie tournament is far from over.

To face Asuhi, the top contender, I’d need to reach the finals.

“Asuhi-kun, don’t lose before the finals!” I shout, pointing dramatically.

I pump myself up and run to join everyone in the stands.

I believe this rookie battle will lead to amazing friendships, like the drama club.

And in my head, I’m already dreaming up ideas for my new club.

Afterword

Last Note. here. Somehow, we’ve delivered Volume 2. I vaguely recall a bold, giant announcement in Volume 1 saying, “Volume 2 out this fall!” But here I am, writing this cozy in my kotatsu. It’s undeniably winter. People outside are bundled in coats. Full-on winter. Strange, isn’t it? Life’s full of mysteries.

Living alone, my diet relies heavily on convenience stores, but I can’t shake the feeling that my local store is overly protective.

Once, I bought a cup noodle and got four pairs of chopsticks. Do I look

that clumsy at splitting them?! Did they decide, “This face will mess up three pairs… better give her four”? The guy at the next register got one pair. Is he a “chopstick-splitting pro” face?!

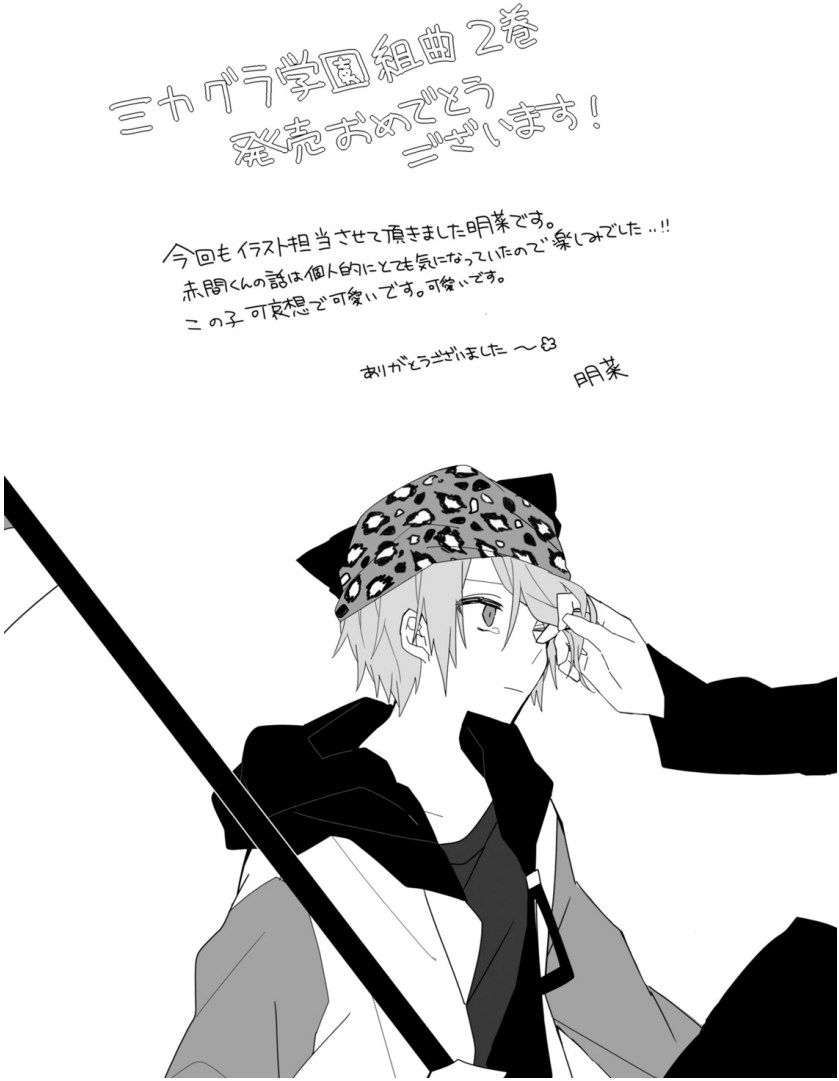
Recently, I bought a protein jelly and got a straw. That’s next-level. I can suck it without one! I’ve got that much power!

Buying a bento is chaos. They toss in five wet wipes. Sandwiches or multiple bentos? Fifteen wipes, like, “Throw in everything we’ve got!”

Too many! Do they think my hands are that dirty?! I’m not rolling up to the register covered in mud like a kid after playtime.

It’s not one weird clerk—every clerk does this. Amazing.

Yesterday was the wildest. I bought a meat bun and got a spoon, fork, and napkin. Am I some noble?! I can bite a meat bun like a normal person!



I'm curious to see how much this store will pamper me in the future.

Mikagura Gakuen Kumikyoku's story is finally kicking into gear with Volume 2, feeling like a proper battle tale.

Each episode weaves into a "suite," coming together as one flow.

I’m having fun writing, so I hope you’re excited for what’s next!

Seisuna Trip, a novel based on my song, comes out from Fujimi Fantasia Bunko in February 2014. I’m the original creator and supervisor, with another writer penning it, but it’s turned out great. Curious what kind of story that song becomes? Check it out!

Mikagura Gakuen Kumikyoku’s official site is up! My latest tweets show on the homepage—a bit of a羞恥 play. Visit to embarrass me: http://mikagaku.com/

Last Note.

Author
Last Note.
In an interview, I was asked, “What was your youth like in school?” I answered, “Kinda hopeless, I guess…?” but that part got cleanly cut. What was I supposed to say?! My life’s still pretty hopeless, unchanged from my school days!

Illustrator
Akina
I’m Akina, handling illustrations! The eggplant tempura at my local diner is amazing!

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Mikagura Gakuen Kumikyoku 2: Mukiryoku Coup d'État

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0. Translation Notes:

The tone remains lively, exaggerated, and comedic to match the original’s style, capturing Eruna’s over-the-top personality and the story’s playful energy.
Japanese names (e.g., Eruna Ichinomiya, Lumina Rikyuu) are transliterated directly, preserving the original convention.
Cultural references like harisen (paper fan), purikura (photo booth stickers), and kotatsu (heated table) are retained with context clues for clarity.
Specific terms like “eiyuu” (hero) are explained within the narrative to maintain Eruna’s voice.
The battle system’s fantastical elements (e.g., abilities, crystals, barriers) are translated to be clear and immersive.
The afterword’s humor and personal anecdotes are kept intact to reflect the author’s quirky voice.
The original’s formatting, including section breaks (⁎) and chapter titles, is preserved for authenticity.

3. Translation Notes:

The tone retains the original’s mix of comedic exuberance (Eruna’s sections) and introspective melancholy (Yuto’s sections), ensuring character voices remain distinct.
Japanese terms like zettai ryouiki (absolute territory), harisen (paper fan, implied in the playful bonk), and cultural references (e.g., gravure poses, fighting game catchphrases) are kept with context for clarity.

Seisa’s ability name, Killing Art, is translated directly to preserve its dramatic impact.

The narrative structure, including section breaks (⁂) and shifts between Yuto and Eruna’s perspectives, is preserved.

The afterword from the previous artifact is not included, as it was not part of the provided "c2.txt" excerpt.